

MELODY AYRES-GRIFFITHS PRESENTS

FATTICUS FACES THE WOLF

A SLUMBER-TIME ADVENTURE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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In 2006 she met the love of her life April, an Australian, on-line; briefly, Melody went to meet her and, after evaluating their futures on either continent, the couple elected to settle in Melbourne.

Melody then chose to take on the task of writing a novel; this is the product of that effort.

When not writing, Ms. Ayres-Griffiths occupies her time practicing jazz piano, and tending to her guinea pig, Gig.



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This novel is dedicated to my beloved Lady April, my lost Prince Tigger and my beautiful Queen, Gidget.

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INTRODUCTION

A WORD BEFORE WE BEGIN

YOU HOLD IN YOUR HANDS A BED-TIME STORY, a modern-day fairy tale filled with romance and intrigue, populated by characters both humorous and unsavoury and containing events both outlandish and firmly entrenched in reality.

Comprised of thirty-two short chapters this book is intended for adolescents young and old. It is also suitable for night-time consumption by parents and, if deemed appropriate, their younger children. The narrative contains moderate violence, but nothing more serious than that observed in American prime-time programming or movies that recommend parental guidance.

Certain passages may be noted to contain material that is perhaps too emotional for more sensitive family members, 'A Friend in Need' and 'The Tuna of His Eyes' in particular; it may be wise to forgo their reading. In fact, it is strongly recommend that parents evaluate each chapter beforehand. Otherwise, I hope that you will enjoy this account of the opening adventures of Fatticus as much as I enjoyed writing it.

You may never look at a ginger-tabby in quite the same way again.

PROLOGUE

WAITING FOR THE MOMENT

IT WAS SHEER unadulterated agony.

The man stood silent in the cold darkness of his hiding place, while he listened painfully to the events unfolding mere yards away from him. His true love, unaware of his presence nearby, was closer than she had been in over a decade during which he was forced to remain away from her, lest those who were in control of his life choose to do harm to her in retribution for his insolence.

It was still, however not the time. The moment was both absolute and inflexible. Were he to reveal himself before that designated instant it could spell disaster for the entire undertaking, a venture that had been many painstaking years in the making. Yet, his love was in potential peril at that very second and it took all the willpower he had inside him to stay his hand and not enter the fray with undue haste.

There was an evil, foul brigand who currently had a firearm, a pistol trained on his angel. He would do penance for what he had done to them, face justice for his role in the terrible act of keeping the couple apart for so very long and suffer the consequences of the misery that he had inflicted upon them.

She was the love of his life, the woman for whom he did everything; without her, nothing had any meaning. They had been so wonderfully happy together, and known bliss such as very few would recognize. It had been stolen away from them, absconded with by men who were not acquainted with the true meaning of love, and that were quite satisfied to snatch it away from others in order to realize their own aims.

Those men, or at the very least one man in particular would soon see the folly of his appalling ways.

A shot rang out; his heart surged, muscles tensed and his lungs filled with air as his careful discipline was overwhelmed by a swell of emotion. His

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mind petitioned quite strenuously for him to spring into action straight away and defend his beloved wife, and around the grips of the two swords that he held under his cloak, his hands tightened in preparation of their impending use. However, when he realized his love had not been harmed by the sharp exclamation of violence, his call to arms was quickly tempered.

It was a revelation for which both he and his constant companion, the blue-eyed ginger tabby that stayed at his feet, were most grateful.

In a few scant moments he would confront the contemptible fiend reigning terror a mere stones throw away from where he concealed himself, but they would pass with all the speed of the slowest glacier, each taking longer than the last and those more harrowing than any of the tensest moments he had formerly experienced.

He could not be rash and he could not rush in. His actions would need to be considered and confident should he wish to be successful. There were no allowances for responses driven by his feelings, and would be no second chances should he fail to keep firm control upon the situation. If he allowed such a fatal indulgence, it could be a complete catastrophe.

Therefore, he waited.

The man stood silent in the cold darkness of his hiding place, while he listened painfully to the events unfolding mere yards away from him.

It was sheer unadulterated agony.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BALLAD OF EDWARD FATTICUS

LONG BEFORE FATTICUS BECAME INVOLVED in those unseemly events, he was a kitten.

It had been a frightfully cold winter, one of the frostiest that the Scottish housekeeper could recall weathering. Missus Glenferrie had found the cat, half frozen and clinging to life, huddled in a corner on the front porch that served as entryway to her master's modest home, in a less affluent but respectable outer suburb of London.

Furthermore, the feline was pregnant; there was nothing to do but take it in. The woman knew that her charity, in a household of humble finances, would result in more mouths to feed. Nevertheless, it would be uncivilised behaviour to permit the poor creature and her kittens to succumb to the elements.

Such notions were only those of savages.

Missus Glenferrie had hidden the ginger-tabby in her pantry, and secretly nursed the cat back to health the best that she could before the master of the house, a widowed British Army officer and a veteran of the Great War, became aware of the stowaway's presence. At that point, the man complained bitterly regarding the intrusion, and protested at some length the potential inconveniences posed by the introduction of such a 'four-legged, furry nuisance' into his rather restricted quarters.

"Perhaps you might like to invite some rats in, next. Then, you could adopt some dogs, and a pig. At least if you brought in some chickens, they could be put to use laying eggs."

Regardless of her master's objections, the Scotswoman stood firm in her resolve that 'Ginger' was to remain. Her offspring would be born and then, when they were of suitable age, they were to be given for adoption.

“Not just to anyone, though. They’ll have to meet to my standards, and I have to say they’re rather high, in order to take one of my kittens,” she declared tersely.

Having engaged Missus Glenferrie’s services for many years, and grown to know her a great deal over that time, the master of the residence had the unsettling notion that this process might require a great deal of his patience.

However, despite his conviction that the situation would inevitably cause him distress, the military man was forced to placate his housekeeper and relent, but stated firmly in his defeat that he would tolerate the presence of the feline only so far.

“It would be your responsibility to place the kittens into new homes, and in a timely fashion.” He concluded with an uncertainty in his timbre, “I trust you will be capable of that.”

The housekeeper agreed cheerily, and the matter was for that moment resolved.

Weeks passed and then, early one spring morning there were kittens. A litter of six was born, remarkably all ginger-tabbies who, like their mother had beautiful blue eyes. Although, if you suggested that one of them could count for two, you might be given to argue that there had been seven; for his weight, he could have easily qualified as such.

In any event, it would almost be an understatement to declare that the kitten was unusually large.

It might have been a she; it was uncertain at that time as to which gender the fuzzy cherub belonged. The Scottish housekeeper had named him Edward, for reasons that she declined to elucidate. If female, it may have instead been Edwina, but Missus Glenferrie was convinced that the kitten was a boy, since he was quite voracious at his poor mother’s teat.

That was a sight for which the Scotswoman had felt great pity for Ginger.

The bulbously shaped kitten was insatiable. It would be reasonable to speculate that Edward’s early thoughts consisted likely almost exclusively of “*Eat, eat, eat, eat, eat, eat, eat, eat, eat, eat, eat, eat, sleep, poop, eat, eat, eat, eat,*” and in those general proportions.

When they had taken to solid food, Missus Glenferrie had to become quite vigilant with respect to the felines’ mealtimes to ensure that the other kittens were able to eat their fair share. If she had not done so, Edward’s appetite might have led all of his siblings to starve to death.

Typically, as it matures such a kitten will become equal in size to the rest of his litter, but this was not the case with Edward; the older he grew, the larger he became. It was a curiosity that the housekeeper would chat about at great length with any who would listen to her.

“Have you ever seen such a thing?” she would marvel with Missus Footscray over afternoon tea. Her guest would always shake her head to the negative, and agree that she had never before encountered such a sight.

“He probably weighs the same as his mother. How much does he eat?”

Missus Glenferrie would laugh. “His diet is better than mine, I’d wager.” They would then quietly gaze upon the kitten whilst sipping the remainder of their tea.

The enormous kitten provided a never-ending basis for casual conversation.

To his credit, the always-ravenous Edward was equal in his affections as he was to his gluttony. Once he discovered his ability to purr, he exercised it liberally throughout the day. The tabby never declined the touch of a gentle hand, and he enjoyed playful activities. This juvenile feline ‘defence mechanism’ ensured the ongoing supply of the cuisine to which he had become most partial.

He was fat, friendly and just so dreadfully adorable; the numbers of people who can resist such charms are few.

However, although Missus Glenferrie, in respect to Edward’s immense appetite was always quite generous in the portions that she had provided, the quantity had never been found to be sufficient enough to satiate the kitten. One evening, the woman had found him ensconced within a pot of casserole that she had removed from, and placed on the cupboard beside the oven in her kitchen.

The rather heavy cast iron lid was still affixed properly to the rim of the vessel; there were no signs as to how the obese, but still tiny kitten had been able to force it open and climb his way inside. Yet, when Missus Glenferrie had gone to serve tea, there was where she had observed the industrious little cat, happily striving to fill his seemingly bottomless stomach on her master’s dinner.

“You... *fatty cuss!*” the housekeeper cursed at him under her breath as she pulled Edward abruptly out of the pot. She proceeded to drop him upon the floor, and swiftly chastise the offending kitten with her broom.

It would not have done to mention the incident to the master of the household; of course, there was no need to waste such a perfectly good meal. That the kitten had obtained admission to the interior of the kettle would stay a mystery known only to the Scotswoman.

The epithet remained though and, as it soon became common pastime to swear in reference to the actions of the troublesome tabby, Edward would become forever known to the world by his revised label, the 'Fatty Cuss.'

The unfortunate truth of the incident was that the 'Fatty Cuss' was not at all certain as to how he had gained entry into that pot. All he could remember was that, at one moment, he was positioned outside the kettle, smelling tasty odours emanating from it, and wishing that he was being made acquainted with what resided within; the next instant, Edward was inside, giving himself a comprehensive introduction to its delicious inhabitants.

How the tabby had found himself there was not terribly important to him at that time; his major concern had only been the following, and rather inappropriate removal of the kitten from his scrumptious buffet.

Later, it was to be an experiment that the always-hungry Edward would try to repeat, but with depressingly little or, more accurately no success. The kitten attempted to simply push himself through the exterior of the pot, and his malformed hypothesis merely served to severely burn his tender nose, leading to several subsequent hours spent soaking his nasal button in the soothing coolness of the water bowl.

The 'Fatty Cuss' then tried perching himself atop the pot, patiently waiting with the intention of eventually sinking through the lid, but received only a resounding sanction delivered with the housekeeper's broomstick for his efforts. He promptly declared the endeavour to be hopeless.

There appeared to be no method of re-admittance into the pot. That revelation painfully perturbed the perpetually famished kitten a great deal. The furry, leg-bearing cricket ball withdrew from his pursuit, and then resigned himself to the uninspiring fare that he, along with the other kittens regularly received.

The problem remained however that those rations would never be of sufficient quantity to fully serve Edward's needs, for he was always so desperately hungry. In fact, it was quite likely that no amount of food would ever fill the hole within the kitten's belly; as such, he would require an endless supply. The ginger-tabby devised a new stratagem, one that should it succeed he was quite positive would put an end his predicament.

One afternoon, while his siblings were all deep asleep in the former vegetable crate that they called their home, Edward made his escape and, as quiet as could be hid beneath the kitchen table, his form shaded by the cloth that covered it. He waited, as patiently as any kitten could for Missus Glenferrie, in the midst of meal preparation to turn away from the pantry, leaving the cupboard door open, and unguarded.

Edward was not entirely sure what lay within; all he knew was that at least some of what had emerged from it had eventually resided briefly in his supper bowl. It was his aim to cut out the middleman, or woman in this case. The storage compartment appeared to have an unlimited supply of groceries, so there would be no harm if he took up station at the source of his nutrition.

His deed would also function as an act of compassion towards his brothers and sisters; if his stomach did not necessitate the commandeering of the supper bowl every single night, they would have much more to eat.

When it appeared that the woman would soon move away from the cupboard, he tensed in preparation. Edward then slowly began to creep. The 'Fatty Cuss' remained silent, as if he were a tiger in the jungle stalking his prey. Like a soldier on an assignment of the greatest importance, he moved with a careful determination not to be caught in his attempt, and make it inside the pantry.

After all, he was on a mission that could save the world.

Rather, he was not, precisely; in truth, it served an even higher purpose. More importantly, it would rescue his stomach.

The human temporarily departed, and the door remained open. It was then his chance; the kitten bounded towards, and was quickly within the pantry. A harrowing few moments subsequently transpired while Edward waited, with his breath suspended for confirmation that the housekeeper had, or had not become aware of him during his traversal. He was relieved when an apparently undisturbed Missus Glenferrie moved back to the pantry and returned an unseen object inside the cupboard, to its place on a shelf high above.

An adverse eventuality, previously unconsidered at that point became a much real event; the housekeeper then firmly shut the pantry door.

The adventurous kitten had been confronted with his first major challenge. It was dark, more completely so than Edward ever previously experienced. The frightened cat resisted his overwhelming desire to mew, and did his best to be brave; he strove to grow beyond the infantile trepidation that he felt towards his blindness, and regain mental focus upon his crucial objective.

He reasoned that the only thing he truly had to fear was his stomach; with that rationale, he gathered his emotions together and soon the search for provisions began.

There were all sorts of objects occupying the shelf inside the pantry; these included items made of glass and of tin, bags constructed of paper and cardboard cartons. The kitten toppled a jar, and a pervasive powder rolled out like a fog from the container; it covered him as if a dusty blanket. Edward

attempted first to lick himself clean, but the substance foamed in his mouth and so, in disgust, he made his best effort to shake off as much of the offending material as he could.

He failed to understand how this noxious matter had anything to do with food, and hoped that this would prove to be the only exception that he would encounter.

Regaining more of his confidence, the kitten moved on. He found a box containing wrinkled bugs, or at least they were the general diameter of such insects. They seemed like little beetles, but were chewy, tough and did not taste like them at all. He certainly could not survive on that sort of fare. Edward carried forth again.

He investigated many other powders, some of which made him sneeze; there were crystals that made him really thirsty, and those that tasted rather pleasant, but made him feel quite agitated; it was a feeling that the little cat was unaccustomed to, and not convinced he could appreciate.

Soon, the area was a complete and total disaster. It appeared that his undertaking only provided him a relatively limited victory; he had located what would loosely qualify as food, but nothing that could sustain him for the near future inside the cupboard. As well, those thirsty crystals caused him to desperately crave water, which was regrettably not available within the pantry or more precisely, and this he knew for certain, not on his particular shelf.

He would be required to promptly depart, and quickly.

To his misfortune, the door refused to comply with Edward's desires. He had first pushed casually, and subsequently shoved repetitively with increasing urgency, but his efforts were to no avail; it appeared to be stuck shut in some fashion. He then became quite frightened and, whilst the kitten mewed hysterically, he made a frantic assault on the exit. Sadly, as he fought his campaign against the pantry door his tiny legs gained little purchase on the powder-covered shelf, and his struggle proved futile.

His anxiety soon rose to the point of panic; he scratched and howled as loud as his diminutive voice could muster, and then repeated the exercise with an even heartier enthusiasm. It was during this strife that he prayed, promised and vowed never to venture forth inside the horrifying pantry ever again, should the powers-that-be only see fit to allow him to escape the dark prison in which he had become unwittingly interned.

Much to his great relief, Missus Glenferrie heard the little kitten's distress and came to his aid; Edward sprang free from his prison, and ran gratefully out of the kitchen, followed closely behind by the angry cries of the

infuriated Scotswoman. Although quite appreciative of her for his renewed liberty, he was justifiably afraid of the housekeeper's unforgiving broomstick.

The little kitten swore that he would be true to his vow and never attempt to enter the evil pantry again. He would simply have to find other ways to get his fill.

Time passed and, in harmony with his hunger, Edward grew. It was not long at all before a new plot began to emerge from the recesses of the starving kitten's scheming mind. By order of the master of the house, still-living animals were not permitted within the room in which the humans ate. Despite this, Edward had become convinced that, were he to plead his case to the man of the house, his generous patron would reward the petitioner with further portions.

Indeed, it was the bold feline's intention to ask the following, time-honoured question, "Please sir, may I have some more?"

That evening's agenda was to include an exceptional banquet; the humans referred to the extensive meal as 'Easter.' It was a grand feast, and there would be no better time, Edward thought, than this celebration of abundance to make his simple appeal for kindness. In such a context, there was no doubt in the kitten's mind that his appeal would result in a resounding dietary victory.

Edward concealed himself several hours before the festivities were set to begin, under the china cabinet that resided beneath the window through which the afternoon sun streamed into the dining room. While he waited, he fell asleep and dreamt of the bounty that he was certain to receive for his efforts. The fat little kitten imagined that there would be all sorts of tasty treats with which to satisfy his wanting stomach.

It would be, at long last, full, satiated and replete.

He awoke to the darkness of night, and the sounds and smells of the wondrous meal being served. The menu consisted of roasted goose, mashed potatoes, tender squash and savoury gravy. The humans were soon gathered about the table, and his intestinal overlord began to rumble with its demands that an offering be made to it without any further delay.

Edward carefully crept out from his hiding place underneath the cabinet and slid silently beneath the dining room table, where he made his way cautiously over to his master's legs and prepared to plead his case.

Then, the kitten had a thought.

He pondered on the potential benefits of instead making his appeal from the podium of his master's lap. If he were closer to the man, Edward would be able to exercise the full measure of the charms that his youth had provided him;

after all, it was his intent to impress the man with his cuteness, which would be a great deal more evident at such a close range.

After a rather brief deliberation, Edward decided that he agreed with himself; the kitten then swiftly set off on an expedition to climb upon his master's lap, using the man's leg as an impromptu ladder.

He had not made it at all very far in his ascent before the master exclaimed loudly, and then hastily took to his feet; in the process, he pulled at the tablecloth that he had tucked into his shirt for use as a napkin, throwing his plate, and the contents thereof, tumbling down onto the floor below.

The kitten fell and, briefly startled, had begun to 'make a run for it' when he noticed that a leg of roasted goose had conveniently placed itself not far askew from a potential avenue of escape.

Opting to find a brighter side to such a dreadful situation, Edward summoned the whole of his tiny might; he retrieved the drumstick, and dragged it with his teeth towards the exit. In the ensuing chaos, he made his way through the door to the kitchen unnoticed, but afterward became confused regarding where he ought to go next.

The pantry door, open barely the slightest crack, beckoned him into a sanctuary within which he could hide from the furious humans that were running amuck throughout the residence. He could not accept the offer; on the one hand, it would violate his sacred oath, and on the other, his fear would not permit him to risk his becoming trapped inside the cupboard once more.

Then again, the goose's leg smelled so wonderfully good, and there was so much delicious meat on it that Edward could not possibly consume it all without being given ample time in which to do so.

The humans were searching for him quite feverishly, and if he did not conceal himself soon it was a safe gamble that they would discover him quickly.

"You fatty cuss!" Missus Glenferrie shouted, "When I get my hands on you, you are going to wish that..." The threat required no distinct conclusion.

Prodded along by both his ravenous stomach and his considerable sense of self-preservation the little kitten, Edward the Fatty Cuss decided to use his invitation, braving the pantry for a second time.

He managed to nose his way in carefully with his trophy, and the cupboard door made a willing accomplice by swinging gently shut behind him. Edward then listened intently as the hunt for the troublemaker continued unabated, whilst he prepared to devour his well-earned banquet.

The little gourmet was going to take tremendous pleasure in its consumption; much time would be required, and it would eventuate that plenty of it was to be had. In fact, he savoured his meal, between naps, throughout the night and well into the morning, until there was nothing left but a polished bone.

Shortly thereafter, Missus Glenferrie, in her preparations for breakfast, swung open the pantry door revealing in the process a very pleased kitten with an unusually contented stomach.

"You!" The angry Scotswoman hoisted up the larcenous kitten by the scruff of the neck, raised her finger to his nose and was ready to chastise him with a severe scolding when her rage abruptly gave way to relief. She instead cradled the goose-thief in her arms, and stroked his forehead lovingly. "I was worried about you all night, you damn little cuss," she said quietly.

"I'll forgive you just this one time, but if you ever do anything like that again," she continued gravely, "you'll be shaved bald, and your fur will be fashioned into a hat."

Edward, not quite certain if the woman meant it as a threat or a jest, took that under careful advisement. Frankly, he was not sure he even cared; for the first time in his life, he was actually full.

To ensure that such a fiasco did not make an encore performance, Missus Glenferrie tied a little bell around Edward's neck with a red piece of yarn to keep his further efforts to a minimum and, much to the his immense dissatisfaction, it proved to be quite proficient at doing so.

Time went on once more, and soon the kittens were weaned; they were finally ready for adoption. Ginger-tabbies were quite popular, especially ones as unusual as these and it was not going to require a great deal of effort to find good placements for them in respectable homes.

Strangely, and much to Missus Glenferrie's relief, nobody seemed to take an interest in the obese little kitten, nor he take any liking to them. The housekeeper had come to love Edward very much, and it was not the best kept of secrets that she did not desire to see him go.

The master, on the other hand, wanted Edward to disappear sooner rather than later. He would ask if anyone had yet elected to adopt 'that portly disturbance' every evening, upon his return.

"You did, at the very least, try to get rid of it," he would query leadingly to Missus Glenferrie, who would then quickly assure him that she had indeed given her utmost efforts towards Edward's adoption. "I am quite sure that you have," the master would retort sarcastically; the man retreating to the relative safety of

his study, he would afterwards mutter his contempt for the troublemaker who had deemed it acceptable to ruin his Easter dinner on his way up the stairs.

New residences had shortly been found for all of his siblings, and presently only Edward remained. The master, despite his housekeeper's best efforts to convince the man otherwise, persisted to call for his removal; the kitten's mother could remain, but the 'Fatty Cuss' must go, either by adoption or through a forced introduction to an alley, and he wished for that task to have been completed one day earlier.

Thankfully, for the kitten, a woman paid a visit, an author by the name of Caroline Hawthorn; Missus Glenferrie was certain that had been her name. She took to the fat little kitten, with the bell tied around his neck by a piece of red yarn, as if by nature; that had been a surprise to the Scotswoman. It was as if the bond was predetermined, and their meeting had been destined.

"You simply must tell me this adorable fellow's name," Caroline politely demanded, as she held Edward on his back as if he was an infant, and stroked him gently beneath his chin; it was an activity for which he rewarded her with vibrant purring.

"Edward. But, some days, we call him the 'Fatty Cuss.'" Missus Glenferrie laughed, as she recounted a few of the kitten's more notable exploits to the one who would soon give her favourite feline son a home.

Caroline chuckled. "Fatticus," she repeated, contracting the two words into a singular moniker. "I think I like it," she smiled.

It soon followed that Caroline Hawthorn took Edward 'the Fatty Cuss' and he was gone, likely forever.

Missus Glenferrie, for the remainder of her life, would never long for the presence of anyone as much as she would miss the company of that obese blue-eyed ginger-tabby, and the sound of his bell.

CHAPTER TWO

LET SLEEPING CATS LIE

EVERY AUTHOR YEARNs FOR IT.

“Call me Ishmael.”

They can seek it out for not only their whole career, but for their entire lives. It is that quintessential opening line.

“All children, except one, grow up.”

It is one of a writer’s deepest desires to compose such a phrase, one that will become so ultimately recognizable that fifth-year grammar school pupils will know of it, even if they fail to ever appreciate the remainder of the manuscript to which the line serves as introduction.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”

Like unearthing a rare diamond, the discovery of such a sentence is certain to give the author the notoriety that they crave, and ensure their place in literary history.

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.”

That graceful expression of diction not only serves to capture the notice of the publisher, it also ensnares the attention of the audience. Such words form the cornerstone of the foundation upon which the remainder of the narrative is constructed; they make up the first step of what is hoped to be a mutually beneficial journey for both the writer, and their readership.

One such author, Caroline Hawthorn sat in her tattered housecoat to the front of her trusted typewriter idly staring at, yet not quite aware of the crystal bauble that dangled within the window inside the study of her somewhat dilapidated third-story flat. Her grossly obese cat, Fatticus, who had perched

himself on her long-since-commandeered-for-the-purposes-of-writing dining room table, was presently tossing the trinket to and fro with his paws; its chaotic movements served to mesmerize the woman.

A little bell, carefully tied around his neck jingled rhythmically in time to the commotion, further lulling Caroline into a state of trance. Her long, middle-aged face sat spellbound; whilst reflecting upon absolutely nothing she remained motionless, with her mouth hanging open, just slightly.

Meanwhile, the overweight tabby was rather enjoying himself; Fatticus, making his best effort to torture his imaginary delicacy to death prior to its fantasized digestion, batted the bauble about as if it were a hapless mouse caught on a lure.

He could have likely carried on with this amusement for hours; perhaps, on some other occasion, he would. This time, his diversions were not going to be quite so lengthy.

A quiet, but noticeable sound in the direction of the kitchen induced Fatticus to abruptly disappear in a flash of ginger-tinted fur and, just as swiftly, Caroline's empty train of thought found itself violently derailed; in frustration, she bared her teeth menacingly. While the sound of the cat's bell trailed off into the distance, the woman began to foster a primal urge to hurl the typewriter through the window, and condemn it to the cruel rigidity of the pavement that blanketed the car park below.

The unblemished sheet of paper, clutched by the object of her ire, only encouraged her instinctual rage by laughing at her with its nakedness; its vacant visage clearly displayed her literary ineptitude. Not only was she unable to invent the perfect opening line but, for that matter, advance an introduction of any sort.

Indeed, she had not even an inkling of an idea for a direction, nor a prospect of a thought for a phrase with which she could begin her endeavour. Her arcane wizardry, regarding the articulation of diction had abandoned her entirely.

The situation appeared to be entirely hopeless. Anything she had previously produced, no matter how diligently she had considered it seemed afterward to be too cliché, snobby, plain or, to put it bluntly, stupid.

If writing could be described as 'painting with words,' then Caroline's palette currently consisted only of black and white; she had been labouring for weeks, and her monochromatic inspiration had, during that time, been thoroughly incapable of rendering a written image that contained any colour.

As an author, Caroline felt certain that she would soon be an appropriately certified failure. She swept aside her eyebrow-level fringe and buried her face in her palms. It would not be long before she would be forced to

admit her defeat and then abandon writing forever. Fatticus howled then, plaintively, from the kitchen; the phantom sound had been intensively investigated, and then his kibble bowl was found to be empty.

Caroline sighed and, as she stood, threw up her hands in despair; at least the novelist could accomplish one task. She would make the feline even fatter.

He howled again.

“Enough,” Caroline growled, “I am quite aware of your concern.”

For one parting moment, she stared down wistfully upon the typewriter, and the empty piece of paper that it held with the faint hope that her wayward words would choose to present themselves at that late hour upon it. Subsequently, as if in answer to her plea she felt a sudden urge; it became progressively stronger, evolving into an impulse and then became more impatient still, eventuating into a need.

With no apparent reason it was at that very instant an absolute necessity that she type the following sentence, which she did.

A jar of purple tomatoes is larger than the seventh sacred elephant.

The woman merely stood there, with a look of befuddled puzzlement and remained with her gaze fixated on the typewriter, itself situated atop her former dining table whilst she attempted to decipher the meaning of her spontaneous achievement. The persistent howls of a hungry feline soon brought her back to reality, and she shook her head to free herself from the sentence's odd fascination.

“Rubbish,” Caroline promptly concluded. She pulled the piece of paper from the typewriter's platen, crumpled it up with great satisfaction and then tossed it into the overflowing bin quietly occupying the nearest corner.

She decided that perhaps tomorrow her creativity might prove more obliging, lest she be forced to consider other, more remedial career possibilities. Caroline Hawthorn, the famous author, temporarily resigned herself to her current circumstances and went off to feed what was likely the fattest cat residing in England during the 'Year of our Lord' Nineteen Hundred and Thirty or, quite possibly that had inhabited any point in time at whatever place on the planet.

The exasperated woman also planned to find a glass of wine, or maybe two; Caroline would simply need to have patience and monitor how precisely the events of the evening progressed before making any firm commitments regarding such a crucial decision.

Meanwhile, Fatticus sat gazing sadly at his empty supper dish, and howled again; his attempts at willing some food into existence had been an utter disappointment, and succeeded only in briefly putting him to sleep. This was a talent that he had been working to refine for his entire life. Once, and of this fact he was quite confident, he had concentrated so intensely that some tuna had, much to his great satisfaction, appeared at the bottom of his bowl but, when his trance was broken the precious fish vanished back into the ether from which it had emerged.

This promising recollection reinforced his resolve, and Fatticus stared into his bowl once again; he gazed into it as deeply with his blue eyes as he could, and visualized a cornucopia of tasty treats with which he would fill the vast empty void within his stomach. The feline focussed so intensely that he disregarded the trivial noises of the world about him; such included those made by a tin opener, the snap as a can's lid came free, the gurgle of oil while it drained and the slap of seafood, when it was dropped all too casually into his supper dish.

It was soon thereafter that the cat rather elatedly realized his efforts had apparently met with great success. Fatticus, in astonishment of his own astounding accomplishment stood awestruck for a lengthy moment as, seemingly due only to the efforts of his mystical musings, tuna had appeared in his bowl. He then gulped down the fruits of his labours hungrily while considering the abilities that were consequently available to him.

Perhaps he could use his newfound powers of persuasion to finally convince that infuriating mouse to stumble and permit its own capture; Fatticus was not as quick as he once was, and such an advantage would prove most beneficial. His tea quickly completed, the great mass of a ginger-tabby, satiated and quite pleased with himself, skulked off to either find an opportunity with which to test his theory of mouse hypnosis, or alternatively find a nice patch of floor, warmed by the autumn sun for a well deserved nap.

The cat resolved that he would engage in whichever activity he was presented with first.

Caroline, in the meantime had poured herself a glass of cheap red wine; its origins were French, character that of a dry merlot. She sat in the kitchen and observed Fatticus as he inhaled his fish; the woman gaped in wonderment at not only the sheer bulk of her cat, but at the ferocity with which he took to his principal purpose. Briefly, the feeding frenzy concluded and, leaving the frustrated novelist alone to marinate in the intoxicating juices of her rapidly increasing hopelessness, the feline wandered off to other pursuits.

She emitted a long-suffering sigh; firstly, she was forty-seven years old and she appeared to be as such. Secondly, her sole companion in life was an

obese feline who slept three quarters of the day and thirdly, this the most disconcerting of all, she was an author with an acute case of writer's block.

Her husband Francis, the love of her life had died quite regrettably at the far end of the Great War; ever since, Caroline had been making ends meet on the combined income of both a paltry widower's pension and what she could earn trading on inane romance novellas that were later printed in inexpensive literary periodicals.

It was her firm opinion that they had all been sentimental tripe; romance, by its very nature was nothing more than a juvenile fantasy.

Although Caroline obviously considered the entire enterprise to be rather foolish, the contrived narratives had lent themselves wonderfully to both widespread publication and financial compensation; after Francis's death she had not possessed the will to write anything of greater substance, and the money her self-declared 'drivel' provided had been grudgingly appreciated.

Sadly, she had apparently exhausted her supply of those tales, or simply grown weary of them; perhaps her dismal situation had resulted from a combination of both factors. Regardless, the reality was that the can of tuna had been Fatticus's last; it was going to strictly be dry kibble for him from then onward and, to understate it terribly, that was not a concept the feline would be particularly fond of.

Caroline was rather doting towards the cat, and did not prefer to place either him, or his stomach, into a position of distress but there was little to be done about it; the requisite inspiration was evidently not forthcoming.

The glass of merlot having been emptied, it then replenished itself, as if by magic; at least, if the woman was questioned, that would comprise Caroline's explanation. She made a return to her study, to the bobble in the window and her misappropriated dining table; the maddening typewriter remained upon it as the raven that had stood perpetually above the poet's door.

Fatticus had found an afternoon sunbeam, casting its glow across an old Chinese rug that lay in the centre of the room, and had taken up residence upon it. The cat was on his back with his legs open widely, and his girth spilled out on either side of him as if he was nothing more than a fuzzy bag of gelatine.

This observation had led Caroline to find a modicum of comfort; despite all of their troubles, the cat was still able to enjoy himself. Her mood improving slightly with that agreeable thought, she switched on the wireless cabinet. Perhaps, she hoped, some melodies might help her creativity along. Caroline rather enjoyed music; she had even learned to play the pianoforte with some proficiency while she was younger, but the typewriter was her true instrument.

For many years, it had served as the proper and profitable means of her self-expression.

Lately, however that mechanism had been regrettably rather silent.

As she waited for the vacuum tubes in the wireless receiver to reach operating temperature, Caroline was prompted to nibble on a pencil in contemplation. All she required was the tiniest of ideas, just one silly little thought; if she could merely grasp such a single inspired notion, she could then fashion it into currency that could be exchanged for some tuna with which to satisfy the wants of a lethargic ginger-tabby.

Not one to pray since the war, Caroline resisted the urge; however, even she had to admit that, in her desperation, she was coming dangerously close to resorting to her Christian roots. Happily, she was saved from such drastic considerations when the melodies of the British Broadcasting Corporation emerged from the speaker; they increased in volume and clarity until the author readily identified the piece to be Tchaikovsky's "Waltz of the Flowers," a song that she had last danced with her husband, at their wedding some twenty years before.

They were childhood sweethearts, Francis and Caroline. Well, they had not been precisely; their relationship had resulted from her discovering, while she vainly searched for another that, standing in front of her but rendered invisible by her ignorance, had been the one she had truly needed the most. It had fortunately not become too late for the couple to find happiness, but their time together had been lamentably short.

Although thankful for the moments they had been given, she was so very angry at what few they were, and had been utterly incensed when 'what ought to have been' was so callously torn away from them both.

She had learned quite plainly that life was merely about attempting to make oneself as comfortable as possible before death; it was a macabre jest, the entire exercise a cosmic joke. The universal prank was to bless an unwilling participant with this most precious of gifts, and then curse them with the knowledge that at any moment it could be taken away, not just from them but also from those they love.

It was all rather depraved, and hideously unfair.

While she reminisced, she took a healthy sip of wine, and then gulped down a mouthful. The woman, lost in her recollections absent-mindedly ran her fingers through her shoulder length, greying brown hair. Fatticus's paws started to twitch as if in his sleep he was chasing an imaginary prey.

Caroline envied that cat; his life was so simple and carefree. For a brief moment, the frustrated author wished that she could exchange places with him.

Fatticus huddled beneath the snow-covered branch and shivered, cursing his decision to leave the peaceful security of the cabin, and the comfort of his warm position in front of the fireplace. He wondered how he could have been such a fool to commit such a crime.

The large, menacing beast that had been pursuing him all afternoon stood in the clearing in front of Fatticus's concealed position, and slowly surveyed its surroundings; its steely cold eyes picked apart every nuance of the landscape in a search for it's overweight, yet stealthy prey. A sound was heard, a crash as melting snow fell from a pine bough and a flash of ginger was briefly observed as the miserable cat fled once again.

Across the seemingly endless forest Fatticus bounded, moving as fast as his poor legs could carry his king-sized frame, to a further hiding place under yet another limb. The instrument of his destruction always remained close behind.

All he had wanted to do was experience freedom; he was bored of his sheltered life within the cabin, and he felt that there was so much more to see, never mind to eat on the other side of the front door.

Fatticus had elected at an opportune moment to steal through that same entrance, running for the mysterious woods that surrounded the cabin; the desired liberty was soon his and it was, at least initially extremely invigorating. The captivating sights and novel smells had urged him further into the forest until he was uncertain where he was anymore; the cat found himself lost, frightened and in utter despair. Then, to make his gloomy affair even more so, the beast came.

His excursion could no longer be said to be amusing; Fatticus was soggy, wet and cold. The cat wished to be in his nice safe home eating his dinner, and not out there in the wilderness where he was about to become a meal for someone else. His mind drifted back to the warmth and comfort of the fireplace, and the memory put him at ease for a few precious moments.

Then, some movement occurred and another sound was heard; Fatticus ran, and the hunt went on once more.

Caroline wondered what her slumbering feline might be dreaming about; as the minutes had ticked past, his naptime spasms became increasingly agitated. Whatever his fantasy, she hoped that he was being entertained; maybe, if she was made aware of his visions the writer could fashion a tale from them.

She shook her head to clear the mind that contained within such foolishness. To pen a narrative detailing the mundane exploits of a pussycat, that would be quite fanciful indeed. Caroline discarded the absurd suggestion, and turned back to the typewriter; she inserted a piece of paper into its waiting grasp, and readied herself for yet another attempt to achieve literary greatness or, at a minimum, tradable mediocrity.

Fatticus twitched again, and spontaneously Caroline typed.

The wolf was hungry. Separated from his pack several days ago and hopelessly lost in this labyrinth of a forest, he was on the verge of total starvation.

Caroline reflected upon what she had written, and considered that it might just be that the author had finally obtained the necessary inspiration with which she could begin her work. She took another healthy sip from her quickly diminishing glass of merlot, and set out with the brave intention to compose another line.

Momentarily, and with equal spontaneity she continued.

It had been a stroke of well-needed luck that he had happened across the odd looking creature sitting there so boldly out in the open; it was as if he had received an invitation from the forest to partake in a much fortunate feast.

There was another pause; Caroline was becoming increasingly intrigued by her impromptu creations. Even though she lacked a theory regarding from which undetermined recess of her mind these sentences originated, she decided that she might as well permit their continuance.

The import of the word 'nothing' would be inadequate to convey the vast emptiness that otherwise comprised the sum total of her conscious creative thought.

Thankfully, the typing soon resumed.

The law of the forest states that if it runs, you ought to pursue it, and if it chases you, you had best flee. The odd little ginger-haired creature had scampered as fast as its legs could carry it, and the wolf, as the edict commanded, had followed with the last ounce of his strength.

The act had been one of desperation. The wolf had never encountered this creature before; he had no idea of how it would behave if confronted, or what hidden weapons it might possess. It could kill him, but he had no other alternatives.

Once more, he sensed the creature and again it ran; he chased it from one clearing to the next and from one hollow to another in what seemed an endless sequence, until finally he trapped it in a thicket from which there appeared to be no escape. Then, as its defeat seemed imminent, the creature engaged in a surprisingly brash enterprise.

Fatticus began to growl softly in his sleep. Distracted by his guttural emanations, the author turned from her typewriter to study the comatose feline; his ears were pushed back up against his head, as if he was confronting an adversary. Caroline briefly considered rousing him but then, for that moment thought better of it.

The creature hunkered down on its haunches, as if in preparation to strike. It growled quite menacingly, and emitted a hiss as if it were a serpent; the wolf did not know what he should do. If this animal was a snake, it may be venomous.

He considered that he might do better to wisely move along and not partake in such risks; however, he was burdened with fatigue and unable to decide upon a further course of action.

The growls emerging from within Fatticus had risen to a feverish pitch, and ruined any subsequent concentration on the part of Caroline.

"Quiet, cat!" she insisted rather strongly of the slumbering tabby which, so rudely awakened then ran frightened from the room. The author, contented that his disruptions had come to an end directed her attention back to her typewriter, eager to proceed further upon relating her mysterious tale.

Unfortunately, much to her immense disappointment she simply sat there for several minutes and typed nothing more.

She had become mired once again in her poverty of imagination. Caroline repeatedly reread what she had recently written, but her efforts were unable to inspire any further narrative; the battalion that had previously laid siege to her creativity had returned with a full complement to resume its literary blockade.

The understandably depressed woman sighed and, while she commiserated with herself, even sobbed a little; the melancholic writer soon turned her ruminations, as she emptied it through its crooked chimney, toward the distorted hand-blown shape of her cheap bottle of merlot.

She debated the merits of purchasing higher quality liquor, but decided that she saw no purpose in the additional expense.

By the end of the evening, they all encouraged the same result.

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When Caroline had finished with her wine, she then retired, inebriated and alone, to her bed; she dreamt of memories that she would rather forget, and then awoke again to a life the widow wished she were trapped within no longer.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MAN ON THE WHITE HORSE

AS WITH ALL TALES, the stories of people have their foundations, their commencements and their finalities. The following details the beginnings of one Caroline Hawthorn.

James Camberwell, an older, scholarly gentleman of modest means, remained in nervous wait within the study of his estate, a small farm two days travel to the north of London. He fretted; for his wife Mary to have a child so late in life was very dangerous, and it was a risk that he wished they had never been forced to take.

Her labour had thus far been quite difficult and, as he paced back and forth in front of his desk with an endless energy, was still ongoing; the man had been doing so for what seemed a multitude of hours, as the summer sun fell ponderously lower in the afternoon sky.

The monotony had only been briefly broken when the midwife had entered. The nurse then informed him that the child had become wedged in a reversed position within the birth canal. It was going to prove difficult to extract the infant and, obviously, time was of the essence.

It was all James was capable of to nod gravely, then dismiss the woman and resume his anxious pacing; there was, exasperatingly, no other course of action available to him.

Thankfully, Mary was several years younger than he was, over a decade in fact; however, it was still very perilous for someone of even her age to be giving birth to a child. The exercise could kill her, the infant or both; none of those options was acceptable to James but, much to his frustration, the affair was entirely outside the realm of his control. Consequently, he could only stroke his beard, pace and smoke his pipe, which he puffed upon rather intensely.

Despite his strong desire to act to the contrary, it would not be proper of him to become directly involved in the process. This was the work of women and midwives and not a place for a man, unless a doctor became required; he had sent for one several hours ago. That the physician had not appeared was becoming, as the cries of his beloved wife tore farther and deeper into his soul, increasingly infuriating to the progressively more desperate James.

Furthermore, the man had great concern that he was too old to be a father; James was sixty-two years of age. Assuming the elder Camberwell survived, and that was less than likely, for many more years then around his eightieth birthday he would be attending his progeny's wedding. That notion sounded both absurd and preposterous; he berated the idea that a surly old relic such as himself could be a suitable parent to a child.

An even more troubling thought then emerged; heaven forbid that the infant was found to be a boy. James was definitely not as spry as he had been formerly, and the implications regarding the physical aspects of his raising another precocious son were quite profound.

The semi-retired, university professor of history prayed heartily for a daughter.

Just in time, for both mother and daughter, the doctor finally arrived; Mister Camberwell had his desires met on all counts. Despite his tremendous relief, he did still insist upon disparaging the doctor quite obscenely when the affair was finished for it was his custom to do so towards people who ran afoul of his sharp temper.

James argued quite sombrely in his own defence that, at the very least he had, instead of implementing one of the more gruesome plans he had devised whilst painfully awaiting the offensively tardy man, allowed the physician to live. For that mercy, the professor ought to be commended.

Mary had been understandably rather content that her ordeal had passed; however, she seemed in some way changed. It was as if a shadow fell over her spirit, fashioned by all of the pain and suffering she had been forced to endure; that she would never be quite the same again, it was fair to say.

His wife made it quite clear to James that he was never going to be further given the opportunity to set such events in motion; the man, grudgingly, sadly and forlornly agreed that such an edict provided the best course of action. That child would be their last.

Caroline Elizabeth Camberwell, born August 18th in the year Eighteen Hundred and Eighty Three, had been named after Mary's father's mother. She was their eighth child; the eldest had turned thirty a few months before, and the

remaining offspring, a mix of both genders, were interspersed between them. The next youngest children were John, a son who had just turned five, and their daughter Nellie, aged eleven. The others had either been previously married off, or taken to the city. James would see his matured descendants when he ventured into London, which he did frequently to lend the university his particular skills as an historical orator.

As the baby had been born blue, there was some concern; substantial effort had been required after she had been removed quite forcefully from the birth canal in order to revive the child. Some slight damage to her skull by forceps, and mild anaemia did little to further encourage the girl's already vague future prospects.

Happily, Caroline survived infancy; without any more obvious deficiencies than a difficulty with coordination and the occasional absence of mind, she grew well into childhood. Her intelligence was somewhat above average. James enjoyed conveying advanced concepts, in history, philosophy, psychology and the like to his young pupil. Her father was a humanist and, as he had moved to foster the same in all of his children, he strived to transplant this interest onto his daughter.

He was a firm, but fair father; James believed far more in the carrot than the stick, and he resoundingly encouraged whatever pursuits his children chose to take on. Caroline would be raised no differently; although, her above average count of bumps and bruises would lead people to speculate regarding James's propensity for violence. This was an implication that Caroline, to any who would make such a rude enquiry, would vehemently deny.

"Life is about living," the elder Camberwell told her, suddenly, one quiet Christmas afternoon, "not about the afterlife. If indeed, there even is one."

Caroline gasped; the six-year-old child was thoroughly shocked by her father's outburst. The Camberwell family attended church every Sunday, and read the Bible daily; they prayed both morning and evening. They could not be considered to be affluent but, in their own way, they were comfortable; she had been raised to believe that this was all due to the grace of God.

As she sat on the red Chinese rug that lay in front of the fireplace, a gift to the professor from a visiting Asian scholar, the child fretted. If her father was suggesting there was no afterlife, then perhaps he was implying that there was no God. Caroline grimly considered the possibility that the man was a heretic.

"No," her father assured her; he was merely addressing a question of faith. "There may be an afterlife," he continued. "However, that is no grounds not to make the best of what one currently has. One does not stop eating during the year in speculation of a feast on Christmas Day, now does one."

Young Caroline mulled this over, and replied, “Nor does one have a banquet every day of the week.” Her father nodded. The elder Camberwell then sat quietly for a moment in contemplation; the ticking of the old mantle clock filled the silence with its continuous metronome.

“I would like it if you would learn to play the piano,” he said finally, choosing his words quite carefully. James continued, tentatively. “We can acquire one quite cheaply.” Indeed, there had been in recent years a surge in the manufacture of inexpensive pianofortes; the newspapers were filled with advertisements for the instruments.

He paused, to allow her to digest this information; then, he posed a question to the young girl. “Do you have any objection to that?”

Caroline pondered her father’s query for a moment and, finding nothing in it with which to cause her unease, shook her head. “No, I think that would be fine,” she shrugged. The next day the keyboard was ordered and soon the sounds of the instrument filled the house for exactly one hour, daily.

James had been correct to feel that her study of the pianoforte would serve to improve his daughter’s limited dexterity. As an additional benefit, father and daughter would also while away many an hour discussing the life and history of old masters, and philosophize on the importance of their music on society. The two grew a strong bond and, as Caroline matured into a young adult spent much of their time together

Her mother, Mary on the other hand was prone to quick fits of temper; her wisdom solely consisted of the adage that little girls ought to be seen but not heard. She would swiftly blame Caroline for acts that had been committed by her older brother, John. Meanwhile, her sister Nellie, who was often charged with the task of watching the younger children would, while she pursued her own interests, frequently leave them unattended; being of the age where one’s thoughts turned to the consideration of potential suitors, endless deliberations with her peers over her eventual matrimony were far more important than minding her siblings.

John was the favourite of their mother, and he knew it. He could be quite cruel to Caroline, and frequently forced her to complete his chores as well as her own. John would beat her if she did not, and then blame her bruises on her tendency for self-injury; his explanation would be accepted, and he would go unpunished. As a result, she grew to abhor her brother a great deal; when he eventually departed from the family home, Caroline prayed that she would never be suffered to see her despised sibling again.

Of her older sister, the youngest Camberwell was largely indifferent. With so many years between them, there was very little interest on Nellie’s part in

spending any real time with Caroline. She was simply too occupied with her various pursuits to frequently schedule activities with her little sister; when she had, there was no patience on her behalf to make any serious efforts to educate the girl in the various subtle nuances of society. Nellie was far more intent upon locating a well-to-do husband; it was not long before Caroline's sister had betrothed and then left the farm; she was heard from very seldom afterwards.

Due to that neglect, Caroline had been largely left to her own devices regarding social graces; in consequence, she was taken to be unusual, and was cast out, at the grammar school, by her peers. She had no companions in childhood until when, one auspicious day, her brother had introduced her, at a cricket outing to which he had been grudgingly forced to bring her along, to his best friend's younger sibling. The boy's name was Francis; his surname was Hawthorn.

Francis was three years her senior, which is considered quite some time when one is a child; however, he too was not the most accepted pupil at his school. The boy was gawky and clumsy; he stuttered, and was quite often made the subject of cruel jest. Caroline was empathetic, and their time together, imposed at the behest of their siblings soon led to elected outings alone; a strong friendship between the two social misfits began to mature.

She was happier for it, and the house soon filled with the sounds of Caroline's favourite music, the "Nutcracker," which she had been given the opportunity to hear during a visit to London around Christmastime two years previous. The beautiful composition had been played on an instrument she had never seen before, a celesta, and the girl felt that it was the greatest work she had ever beheld.

Caroline had inquired of the man performing the work as to its origins, and the musician merrily enlightened her. A man named Tchaikovsky, a Russian, had composed it; she had thought that he was a genius. There was no written score available, but she memorized its graceful movements; after her friendship with Francis began, she would repeatedly revisit it, with heartfelt passion, on the piano. With the addition of her new companion, her life seemed to have greater meaning.

"Young man, what, precisely is your interest in my daughter?" It was a query with which her father would tease young Francis without mercy. "Do you intend to marry her?"

Francis would blush a bright red, giggle nervously and eventually run off; the poor twelve year old was barely able to comprehend the import of such an outrageous inquiry. Even though it came at the cost of great embarrassment to his daughter, James would obtain great mirth from his teasing.

Perhaps, the cajoling had even caused her, as she became older and began to become romantically interested in the opposite sex, to push from her mind thoughts in relation to the prospect of a more intimate relationship with Francis; he was not to be considered. The pair began to drift apart gradually, as Caroline was further distracted by her fantasies of suitors, marriage and the like; then, one day, on his seventeenth birthday, Francis was relegated, by his father to military college; he had gone, as if forever.

That would prove to be a very sad day for Caroline; until his absence, she had not realized how distraught his departure would make her.

Owing in no small part to the loss of her companion, by the time that she had entered her late adolescent years she had developed a very matter-of-fact view concerning the ways of the world. Her debates with her father, whose health was quickly deteriorating, tended to focus more heavily on the injustices of society, and the need, at any personal cost, to materially succeed in life.

The time she spent at the piano became dull and repetitive, and served only to maintain her near-to-average dexterity; her performances were bereft of their former emotion. Caroline grew to be far too cynical for her age and, like her peers, she focussed the sum of her efforts upon marrying a rich husband; the child, much to her father's mounting distress, merely wished to extend her potential only as far as to raise a family.

"The man that you choose to marry will be with you for the rest of your life," he had argued with her. "It would be very wise to choose carefully. Your happiness is the most important consideration, is it not?"

In spite of his guidance, she ignored her father's advice. Caroline felt that her sole purpose was to, in order to secure her position in society, procreate as much, and as comfortably, as possible. Marrying purely for wealth was an option that deserved a great deal of reflection. She felt that, perhaps the other attributes of her potential husband were irrelevant; those traits that were undesirable would likely be easily manageable.

She was quite convinced that affluence and social standing would make her happy; they were all that she could ever want.

James, who felt that his daughter had shown great promise, was deeply dismayed by her comments. It was the cusp of the twentieth century, and the world was about to observe great changes; it would see a revolution for women in society, and a new order, one where women would be able to exercise their abilities far beyond those of merely being homemakers and socialites. Nevertheless, the more her father told Caroline about this utopian future, the greater was she insistence that it was only going to remain the same; women

would never be given the opportunity to prove themselves to be better than their husbands.

They debated the subject for weeks, and then months; then he died. This simply served to make Caroline's cynicism even worse.

She spoke at his funeral. "My father was a brilliant man, with a wonderful outlook on life. I only wish that I could have the optimism on which he thrived, and that allowed him to live to such advanced years. I will miss him. I will fondly remember our time together and I can only hope that perhaps one day I will obtain the same joyfulness in being that he knew."

In her own way, she was convinced that she would find her own happiness; Caroline was shortly courted by a number of young men from well-to-do families but, to her great consternation, she was always driven to distraction by the impersonal nature of the relationships. Even more infuriatingly, she was frequently turned away for a prettier, more cultured young woman by her suitor.

Soon, having failed to obtain the life that she had for so long dreamt of having, the young woman turned to the perusal of romance novels, enticing fiction with which she could fantasize her ideal relationship. It did not take long before she grew bored with reading about others; Caroline soon took to writing her own fiction, casting herself as the Heroine.

However, it was a story that, as she was unable to find her perfect mate and obtain satisfaction, she would never finish, even in a world fashioned by her own intricate imagination.

It did not seem as if finding a conclusion ought to be so difficult. It was rather straightforward, Caroline thought; all her Heroine required was for the love of her life to ride in and sweep her off her feet. She was just uncertain as to who the love of her life was, what she wished for him to be or why he would ever desire to be with her. Despite this pessimism, she would frequently imagine one particular romantic scene.

"Just beyond the gate to Caroline's family farm, the tremendous white stallion, as it reared up on its hind legs, let out a thunderous sound; she flew to her window, and looked from it to see the silhouette of the massive beast, and its rider slowly make their way down the path to the house. The young woman rushed to tidy herself, as best as she could, before running down the stairs and through the front door, into the arms of the love of her life."

Sadly, she could just never quite bring herself to truly believe in it. It fact, it was all, to put it quite plainly, poppycock. No one was coming for her; such fantasy would never transpire in reality. Caroline had nothing to offer such a suitor; she had no family fortune, and no well-honed skills of culture. Frankly,

her outlook was bleak; she was alone, in the farmhouse with a mother who was starting to contend with senility, the rest of her family having abandoned them for better lives.

“You will need to take care of your mother,” her father told her on his deathbed, “because none of your siblings will.” His prediction had been accurate; no one in her family had returned home for Christmas that year. The Second Boer War was in progress, and what little money there was left supported the two of them rather meagrely; she was soon going to be forced to lower her matrimonial expectations. She would, despite how much she had grown to feel trapped by the farm, disliked her own mother or desperately wished to run away from her responsibilities.

These feelings notwithstanding, Caroline did what her father had required of her, simply because she had promised him that she would do so, and for no other reason.

A banker courted her; he was by no means the richest man in the country, but he certainly made enough money to provide them with a modest subsistence. Caroline began to entertain the idea of marrying such a man, and living such a life; perhaps, adopting a middle-class standing, such as her mother’s, would not be as terrible as she had previously envisioned. To his benefit, the fellow appeared pleasant enough; the couple started to develop an affinity for each other as they spent a great deal of time together. His name was Andrew Lilydale.

Andrew proposed; she almost agreed, at once, to his offer. Her mother was growing increasingly ill; she would shortly require full-time supervision in a hospice. This was a luxury that they currently could not afford; still, a tiny voice, residing within Caroline felt that, just to be positive, she ought to delay her decision for a week. The young woman did, and rightly so she should have for her knight on a white horse was soon due to appear after all.

Francis had returned, a veteran officer of the Boer war. He had served as an engineer in the Army, but was since retired. He arrived late one night on a horse, not white but a stallion nonetheless, at the farmhouse. It was the very same evening that Caroline had finally made her decision to marry Andrew; however, she had not yet informed her suitor. At first, the astonished young woman failed to even recognize her visitor. Francis was much matured, dashingly dapper and politely proper.

This led her, as she beckoned him inside the Camberwell family home, to enquire within herself as to what business such a man could possibly have there.

There was so much news that he had to give her; a great deal had she to tell him in return. Francis mourned for the death of her father, and Caroline

lamented the untimely end of his brother; the older Hawthorn, the one that was a friend to her brother John, had been killed in the war. As it became quite late, she invited her former childhood acquaintance to stay for the night. He did, and remained there for the next as well.

Whilst she renewed her familiarity with the presently adult boy from her youth, Andrew's proposition began to slip from Caroline's mind; it quickly became forgotten. The pair commiserated; they celebrated. A day became a week, and then turned into a month.

One morning, an offer of employment came in the post for Francis; he was to work in London as a civil engineer, building bridges, roads and railways. It was a sound position; Francis sought to accept it. Further, he wished for her to accompany him; in fact, he was quite adamant about it. Caroline need not worry regarding her obligations he insisted, for her mother would be well cared for in a sanatorium.

"I realized, while I was huddled in fear contemplating my own death, that the only person in the world I wanted with me at that moment was you," he said, staring deep into her eyes. "You are the only person in life I could ever truly love."

Her own tale of romance had finally concluded.

"The love of her life picked her up and kissed her, tenderly and passionately, with the utmost care and the greatest love imaginable. She felt whole, complete and happy again; the root of her being was replenished with the strength of his love. It was if she were a tree, and springtime had arrived; she blossomed inside. Caroline Camberwell had at last found her true love."

There was very little discussion. She promptly agreed, in no uncertain terms, with the physical expressions of love and commitment that she had waited for so very long to make.

They took her piano with them.

CHAPTER FOUR

ASLEEP, PERCHANCE TO DREAM

“OH, LET PEAL THE BELLS OF JOY to welcome another blessed day.” Caroline had thought these words, as she was roused from her slumber by the sound of birds cavorting beyond her window, with sarcastic elation. She had awoken to find herself burdened with a miserable headache, and in the possession of a mouth that felt as if it had been stuffed full of cotton soaked in kerosene.

The fault for her ailments was only hers; they were discernibly self-inflicted injuries. That cheap bottle of red wine had been rather satisfying though; Caroline decided that the price of her indiscretion was worth paying. She yawned, groggily and began the complex deliberations required to answer the age-old question of whether she would arise from her bed, or not. The woman shortly concluded that the debate was moot; her bladder was likely to soon force action on its own behalf.

A series of excited jingles informed Caroline that Fatticus was once again chasing dust balls, of which there were many, within the kitchen; the cat was apparently biding his time until his morning kibble would make its much welcomed appearance in his bowl. In an effort to ward off the brisk air of the cool autumn morning, she donned her housecoat, and began to shuffle slowly towards the toilet.

On her return, she paused here and there, conducting a brief inspection of the flat that was her home. She examined her Spartan bedroom; a bed and a bureau were contained within and nothing more. Caroline then took in the sitting room, where no one had ever been entertained, because none had ever cared to come and visit her. There resided a simple sofa and two tables, all of which were covered with sheets to ward away the dust, and a mantle clock, over the fireplace; its chime was left unwound, so as not to alarm the easily panicked Fatticus.

She then surveyed the study, the room that housed an aspidistra that, in spite of her neglect, persisted to survive; as well, it held her mechanical nemesis,

and the scourge of her existence, the typewriter. The author then concluded her tour at the kitchen, the space inside which was truly the domain of her insatiable cat. It was a hallowed place, where dwelled his precious food; that made it a holy shrine for a fat feline.

Within that room, the mighty hunter had earlier stalked his prey; an unfortunate clump of feline hair had made its way into the path of the ferocious beast. As it glistened in the light of dawn, he had darted at it; Fatticus swiped at the fluff with his fearsome scimitars and sent it sailing, far up into the air. It eventually came down again, when it would have the occasion to meet with another assault launched by the juggernaut of a cat; it would ascend once more. This game continued for quite some time.

Fatticus had sat upon his haunches on the checkerboard-tiled floor; the lint lost a trace of its mass every time it encountered the creature's paws until such a point arrived that it was no more. The beast had then moved on, with his instinctual urge to hunt satisfied, to a search for some morning sustenance. It would be soon thereafter that his guardian would make her much-welcomed appearance.

"Breakfast." Caroline considered that subject aloud. The author was uncertain as to when, exactly she had eaten last; that question required several moments of contemplation. It had not been, she was then certain, more recently than the night previous to the last; Fatticus had been served the prior evening with his usual supper, and the woman had instead consumed a more liquid repast. She deemed that recollection to be correct.

It had not been an atypical event; her dietary habits of late had become quite horrid. The woman would regularly go several days between meals of any real substance. She would defend this behaviour with the argument that she was growing older; her assorted body parts were starting to become uncooperative, and her organs had begun to misbehave. Caroline would claim that it was easier, in many ways, simply not to eat.

Besides, life at this point merely regarded simple survival, that of both her and Fatticus. Were it not for the presence of the feline, she might not have bothered eating at all; her aspiration would be to gradually fade away and eventually entirely cease to be. However, Caroline's stomach had issued a rare protest, and she decided that, in order to quiet its irritating expressions of distress, she ought to find sustenance of some sort. The widow would have nothing too complicated; she settled upon preparing a bowl of porridge.

The stove was lit; its warmth slowly evicted the chill that had descended over her lacklustre kitchen during the night. While Caroline endeavoured to assemble the necessary components for her rather bland breakfast, a certain feline was striving to exercise upon her his powers of hypnosis. That ambition

having been rather quickly deemed a failure, Fatticus then resorted to other more vocal methods of persuasion.

“That will be quite enough, you contraption of consumption,” his guardian retorted sharply; his howls lent to a sudden rise in her level of exasperation. Caroline retrieved the stepping stool from its storage, stood upon it and removed a large jar from its place on a shelf high above. Her audience observing with great anticipation, she unfastened the spring-loaded seal; that feature had kept the container resistant to the previous felonious efforts of kibble purloiners, such as the one watching anxiously from the floor below.

She glanced sadly at what meagre quantity that remained in the bottom of the jar, and shrugged hopelessly as she doled out a small amount of the kibble into Fatticus’s bowl; the cat sniffed at her paltry offering, then looked up at the woman with mild disapproval. He emitted a ‘snough,’ a curious combination of a sneeze and a cough, which he generally employed to register his dissatisfaction.

Finding no further sympathy from the human, Fatticus proceeded to make the best of his pitiful situation; he set about the ingestion of his regrettably paltry breakfast. It may be, he considered whilst he figuratively inhaled his food, that this day he would finally make a meal of that annoying little mouse. His mental powers had recently improved; all he required was their token assistance with which to force his would-be snack, in its attempts at feline evasion, to stumble. With his new psychic weapon, he was certain to obtain the only minute advantage that he required to overpower the rascally rodent; then, his stomach would surely be, and most incredibly so, pleased.

Fatticus’s flatmate had boiled her porridge; she sat down at the small kitchen table tucked away in the corner of the room to consume it. Caroline rubbed some of the ‘sleep’ that had collected in the crannies of her fractured eyes, and then broke ground on the considerable task of cajoling her brain into some measure of productive activity. Today, she hoped that her imagination would be polite enough to provide the conclusion to the story that it had teased her with a day earlier; the narrative actually appeared to have some potential. However, the origins of the tale were still quite unclear; Caroline had never before written that style of fiction.

Her niche was romance. The formats in which this specialty appeared had typically been those of clever short stories, dramatic serials and well-researched novels; more recently, she simply wrote whatever she could sell. After Caroline had moved into the small house, in London, with her newlywed husband Francis, she had been given the luxury of writing in whichever way she wished. It had certainly not been a detriment that she was completely and thoroughly in love; nor did it hurt that the income accrued from her vocation was of no great concern. Caroline had enjoyed her labours immensely; this gratification was

evident in her completed works. Publishers eagerly printed her steady stream of fiction; her perfect romance had provided an endless supply of inspiration.

Sadly, this was no longer so.

Mister Mu Kao, the proprietor of the Chinese grocery that occupied the ground floor of the block of flats, the owner of same and Caroline Hawthorn's landlord, knocked on her door just as she had placed her kettle, to make a cup of tea, on the stove. The short, stout oriental man had come with an offering of a small bottle of fresh cream for the fat ginger-tabby of which he had an affinity, and a simple one word question regarding the whereabouts of the current month's rent.

The middle-aged gentleman, whose name sounded to Fatticus remarkably like 'Mew Cow,' harrumphed in frustration when Caroline sadly shook her head, silently expressing her destitution. He shook his finger at her and then nodded, in an odd show of respect, towards the obese feline that stood beside the woman in the entryway. Mister Kao turned smartly, then retreated down the hallway, to make his way down the stairway and return to his establishment below.

The kettle sounded, and the financially bereft author returned to her dismal life inside.

Fatticus was presented, to his great delight, with his cream. Caroline steeped her cup of tea; when it was ready, she took hold of it and revisited her infernal instrument. That she loved to write only served to make her current situation all the more difficult; Caroline imagined that her particular incarnation of hell was to be trapped, bereft of any inspiration, within a room furnished with only a typewriter.

To put it bluntly, the novelist could invent anything that she liked; she and her publisher were merely trading on her name at this point. They were not quite so concerned as to the quality, but the quantity of her material.

That fact only depressed Caroline further. The longer her work continued to suffer, the more her name was progressively losing its well-stood reputation. Eventually, her moniker would be worth nothing at all. For the present, her pride would be set aside; the greater concerns were those of the simple needs to pay the rent and place food in the larder.

In a valiant effort to spur on her creative juices, she repeatedly re-read what she had written the day before; sorrowfully, it just simply was not to be, at least not at that particular moment. She sipped at her tea and began to contemplate alternatives, both literary and otherwise; she even considered less

respectable moneymaking ventures, those such as pick pocketing and skulduggery.

Meanwhile, Fatticus carefully ascended her chair, and pulled his large girth up onto the small woman's lap; as if in a Pavlovian response to his presence, Caroline petted the cat mindlessly, a pastime for which he purred happily in return. His expression of contentment provided a soothing counterbalance to her rising frustration.

Their lives, those of her and Francis, had been quite successful; Caroline with her novels, and Francis had what quickly became his own engineering firm. The money had been quite reasonable, and they were able to afford for her mother to stay in a nice, modern hospital while her siblings fought over the future of the old Camberwell farmhouse out in the country, unwanted.

Of course, they had all proposed to sell it; this had been no surprise to Caroline. She no longer cared what her siblings did with the property; the past had been forgotten, and her present was spent in marital bliss. She was playing her piano once again, and finding great enjoyment doing so; the young woman even dabbled in the art of painting, and other creative pursuits before she had taken to writing full-time.

She had little interest in painting, nor was the piano of any consequence; for that matter, the instrument no longer remained with her. As the cat began to drift to sleep, the purring started to subside; Caroline reaffixed her concentration firmly upon her typewriter. Come 'hell, or high water,' likely some combination of both, the author would compose a sonata of synonyms, antonyms and prepositions before she was moved from her position.

Fatticus twitched slightly while he fell into the realm of kitty-cat dreams; almost instantly, Caroline's fingers, as if possessed by a literary demon, seized control of the character imprinting machine before her

The misplaced pussycat did his best to make himself as fearsome looking, to the beast in front of him, as possible. He had no other choice; he could not run, and he was definitely not going to follow the path that led to his becoming an entrée for some monster. The cat growled, he hissed and he howled like the spirits of the damned in his attempts to persuade the beast that it would best off find its supper elsewhere.

"Pussycat?" she questioned, aloud; Caroline was intrigued. Fatticus shuddered again.

The standoff had then continued for quite some time; the sun was starting to set, and the wolf was beginning to lose his patience. It was an impossible situation; he needed to feed, but was not quite prepared to stake

his life on the requisite gamble. The cat, on his own behalf, had aspirations merely to keep himself alive so that he may eat another day. His greatest desire was for his adversary to grow weary, and move on.

The feline sustained himself on his memories of the fireplace, the roaring cackle of the blaze, and the warmth that it gave; it provided the peace, tranquillity and safety that he so desperately wished he had.

The comfortable laps of his human companions, and the tender touch of their strokes across his fur were memories that seemed so far away, so removed from his current existence that they had become difficult to remember; it was as if they were ghosts from a long forgotten past.

Memories of a long, not-so forgotten past stirred in Caroline as well; typing the passage, she was reminded of the fireplace in her family home and her place on the red Chinese carpet, the rug frequently occupied by her hefty ginger tabby in the study of her flat, and generally ignored by its former childhood occupant.

Towards the end of his life, she and her father would spend long hours in front of the fire, debating subjects such as history, philosophy and psychology, politics and colonialism. For example, he was certain the British Empire would soon fall completely; it was declining already, after all. She argued that 'the sun would forever never set' on the Queen's vast dominions.

Caroline would not allow herself to think about it very often, but when she had, she was reminded that she loved her father very much, and missed him more than she could ever attempt to quantify. She had been, most assuredly, closer to her father than to her mother; the woman was very distant and had, her siblings told her, become more so after Caroline's birth. Coming so closely to death changed her mother; she became prone to anger, especially toward Caroline.

It was ironic that, in the end, Caroline was the only one willing to take care of Mary, since the youngest daughter had been the one so greatly mistreated by her mother; however, Caroline had done so only out of respect for her father, due to a promise made to him that she had vowed to keep.

James had told her, on more than one occasion, that family was the most important possession that one could have. She had generally liked to think that he was correct, but her siblings had appeared to fail at obtaining that message. They had all left Caroline, and their parents, behind, abandoning them in the pursuit of fortune and fame, privilege and society.

Her siblings had all offered 'valid' reasons for their disloyalty. Some quoted irreconcilable differences with her mother; others created irrational arguments with their father. There were disagreements over family decisions, and expressions of shame for their less-than-upper class background. Regardless, none of these reasons had struck Caroline as being of significantly adequate cause to behave in such a callous fashion to one's own family. It seemed to her that the grievances presented by her brothers and sisters were merely excuses provided to abdicate their responsibility to their aging parents.

Despite her thoughts on the matter, in the end it was their decision. Caroline only hoped that the old adage, 'what goes around, comes around,' would hold true with regards to her childish siblings. She, at least, had stood by her parents, and for that she could be proud.

Fatticus twitched again, and the typing continued.

Dusk was starting to settle over the forest, and both creatures knew that their standoff would need to soon end. The cat was cold and wet; his fur was soaked through by the melting snow, and he was quite uncertain as to whether he would be able to survive the evening cold.

The wolf was equally as doubtful that, on what little of his strength remained, he would be able to find other sustenance. Action was going to be forced rather promptly upon them both; each was obsessively calculating their continually diminishing probabilities for survival.

The cat had felt so liberated; he was free to exert his influence upon the newfound outside world, one that would recognize his mastery and pay heed to it. Once he had made his escape from the cabin, he had happened upon a woodland mouse, then chased it, and stalked it. Then, he was the one who had been tracked and hunted, by a demon that he could have never conjured in his own imagination; only the capture and kill remained.

His situation looked rather grim; the beast showed no signs of making an impending departure, and was likely to soon make his strike. The entire matter seemed to be devoid of any hope.

The wolf was lost, and felt so very alone. He not only needed to eat, he had to make his return home; to accomplish that, he would still be required to find his way, and the longer he waited, the more difficult that task would be. The time had come; it was no longer an option to leave the little creature in favour of other prey. He must act, lest any further delay leave him isolated forever.

It certainly appeared as if the pussycat protagonist was about to come to a rather unfortunate end. Caroline, had that been how it concluded, would not

have been surprised; it would have merely suited the cynicism she currently had for her own situation, and that of the world at large. She had not even a single child to take care of her when she grew old; even her mother had that comfort. Despite numerous attempts to at pregnancy, Francis and Caroline had never found success.

There was no appropriate way to know for certain if the issue was with her or with him, but it did not matter. They were only for each other.

Neither did she have friends, or relatives available to assist her; Caroline had severed contact with Francis's family, with whom it was too painful to associate, after her husband was reported lost, and her fair-weather acquaintances would forsake her, unwilling to offer the comfort that, during that dreadful period, Caroline had required.

As far as Caroline was concerned, since her beloved Francis had not been permitted to live, there was no reason for this literary cat to have that luxury, either.

They had buried Francis near the site of his death, or so she was told; Caroline had never been able to bring herself to make the trip, and see his grave with her own eyes. The tragedy had occurred practically at the conclusion of the Great War; Francis had been overseeing the construction of a road to facilitate the withdrawal of equipment from the western front when he was struck down by a mortar shell that was fired accidentally from some distance away. It was 'a sad stroke of misfortune,' the letter from the Army had said, that he had happened to fall in its path.

Francis had been very unlucky, indeed.

The day the letter came, the one ordering her husband back into military service, Caroline was inconsolable. It had broken her heart, and every subsequent time that he would be forced to leave her, she would be so fearful that he was never going to come back. He did return home every so often over the duration of the war; the very last time he was ordered to revisit the fighting, it appeared as if the conflict was mere days away from a finish.

Caroline began to have hope again; she started to plan for their future once more. Perhaps they would adopt; the war had left plenty of orphaned children seeking homes. Then, they would have a family, grow old and enjoy the rest of their lives together.

Of course, that dream had been cruelly stolen away from them.

She felt so pathetic; she was an old woman, alone; her only company was that of a cat, a wireless, and a bottle of cheap wine. It was certainly not the way that she had imagined her life was going to resolve, but it simply was how it was.

Caroline merely needed to pick herself up, dust herself off, and carry on with her affairs before she had even less of an existence than she currently held, and while some of her dignity still remained. The only question that was truly in need of an answer was how she would accomplish such a feat.

The wolf was set upon striking but, while summoning every ounce of strength that remained for his assault, a miracle occurred; a rustling sound emanated from the thick brush that had prevented the feline's further escape. Frozen in their confrontation, the jackrabbit had failed to notice the two combatants while it happily wandered out of the thicket in search of food.

They remained fixed whilst the rabbit made its way over to a patch of wet grass that poked out of the patchy half-melted snow between them. The two then used their eyes to hold a silent discussion, at the conclusion of which they made a pact. It was an arrangement by which they would both benefit and survive. Each took one last glance at the other, a look of mutual respect, and the planned events were set in motion.

As the wolf lunged, the cat ran past the rabbit, confusing the poor creature that had been condemned to death in his place. He ran as quickly as he could while he heard the cries of the rabbit, and the crunch of its bones. Darkness fell, and he raced against it; his instinct eventually guided him back to where he started, the cabin and the fireplace. He then howled at the door, clawed and scratched, until was he readmitted into his sanctuary, a place that he swore never to leave again.

The cat faced a well-deserved scolding; promptly, he was safe once again in front of the hearth, and secure from the too-familiar terrors of the outside world. Those were horrors that he wished he did not have the opportunity to know.

There was no further narrative; the story had concluded. That is, it was after the author had typed one final line.

A jar of purple tomatoes is larger than the seventh sacred elephant.

While Caroline sat wide-eyed in confused puzzlement, Fatticus awoke and stretched; he then jumped down onto the floor, and initiated the rather complex process of washing himself.

The cat was pleased; it had been a quite satisfying nap.

CHAPTER FIVE

LESSONS IN LIFE AND DEATH

“TO CONCLUDE, I must remind you that with freedom comes awful, dreadful, and, at times,” the Brigadier held the following word, and then expelled it as if it were a sneeze, “terrible sacrifice.”

He nodded his head in a matter of fact fashion towards the group of new pupils that stood assembled to his front in the warm, autumn sun; then, the officer made a crisp turn to his right, stepped down from his dais and marched, with a precision that comes only with decades of military experience, off of his parade ground.

Brigadier Lewis Carlton was looking forward, with great optimism, to another training year; it was to be his last and, he hoped, his best. He had been both head master and commander of Collingwood Royal Military College for over a decade; his task was to prepare the minds and bodies of his charges for service as officers in the British military. The Brigadier was very proud of his accomplishments, and he had chosen to end his military career on this high note; his intention was, at the conclusion of the next graduation, to retire to private life.

From English and Mathematics, to Artillery and Tactics, the College served to give a ‘well rounded’ education to the modern young aristocrat of the day. It was the dawn of a brave, new world of mechanized weaponry and complex battlefield strategies; no adolescent nobleman could be expected to survive without such crucial knowledge.

The British Empire was always fighting, and was certain to continue to do so; to suggest that one need not be familiar with these subjects would be to put forward that one did not need to know how to tie his shoes, or to ride a horse. People who attempted to argue such a foolish position simply did not know the ways of the world.

He halted at the edge of the parade ground, executed a textbook about-face and then looked on as his Sergeant, a man named Belgrave, began his

standard discourse of introduction to the new pupils. He would inform them of such basic information as when they would be awoken, when they were expected to retire to their bunks, the various articles that comprised their uniform, their required standard of dress and, perhaps most importantly, the fine art of boot polishing. The new cadets were to be apprised of meal schedules and the location of the infirmary; familiarity with that item was critical, not that any of the activities the students were to engage in were dangerous if performed properly, of course.

The Brigadier soon noticed that one of his students, a rather awkward looking small-framed, big-eared boy apparently lost in his own thoughts, was not giving his complete attention to the sergeant and, to the cadet's pending misfortune, his superior had become aware of it. Belgrave abruptly ceased his monologue, stomped over to the inattentive cadet with a sharp note of irritation and kindly inquired as to the nature of his mental non-attendance.

"MISTER HAWTHORN!" the sergeant bellowed into the poor boy's ear; "What EXACTLY is so IMPORTANT that you need to pay more attention to IT than ME?" The cadet was startled, and became instantly flustered. He looked around nervously; the young man was obviously still quite lost in whatever thoughts he had mired himself in, and was unable to provide his interrogator with a coherent answer. The sergeant was decidedly unimpressed. Belgrave took hold of the boy by his ear; then he pulled it, and by extension the boy tersely up to the front of the division.

Belgrave furnished the cadet with a rifle, and directed him to hoist it over his head. He would keep it there while, much to the well-declared annoyance of the remaining cadets, the Sergeant repeated, from the beginning, all of his instructions. The Brigadier did not envy Mister Hawthorn; those rifles were not light and, for a small boy of his stature, it must have been equivalent to hefting a cannon. Still, the pupils must be taught discipline; that was the most important virtue that the college hoped to instil into its charges.

Discipline often meant, on the battlefield, the difference between life and death; the successes and failures of private life could also be attributed to its presence, or absence. If gaining such a vital part of one's character meant holding a rifle to the point of agony, then so be it.

It is quite likely that, at that particular moment, Francis Hawthorn did disagree unequivocally with the Brigadier's assessment of his sergeant's disciplinary method. His punishment did not seem at first to be that terribly difficult; however, the soldier appeared to be taking great relish in extending his speech. The longer the man droned on, the heavier the rifle became until an ache began to build in the boy's arms; the pain soon progressed, in a matter of minutes from simple annoyance to severe discomfort.

As the Sergeant reached the end of his long sermon, tears had started to swell in the boy's eyes; when Belgrave finally released the cadet from his predicament, the subject of his reprimand had fallen in relief to the ground, prompting a rather piercing lecture on the respect one ought to have for one's weapon.

Francis Hawthorn had then scrambled up, at the behest of the Sergeant from the parade deck lest he suffer any further castigation at the hands of his captor. Eventually, he was directed to carry on; the boy then feebly shuffled off after his division to start his new life as a cadet. While the Brigadier made his way back to his quarters, he began to hypothesize on how the young man was liable to progress in his studies

He resolved that, if Lewis Carlton had any say in the matter, his College would make a soldier out of the boy.

Regardless, to say that Francis did not desire to be present there would be a severe, nay indeed, a gross understatement. In fact, it could wisely be said that he was at the one place on Earth that he hoped to have never been. Despite great pleas to the contrary, his family and more specifically his father had insisted that, like all the Hawthorn men in recent memory, he was to receive a military education and become a career army officer.

His father had staunchly refused to discuss any concerns Francis had regarding his predetermined destiny.

"My grandfather's grandfather gave many years of faithful service to the Royal Army, and my grandfather's father, and my father's father, my father and your father have all done so as well," his father had told him, on his seventeenth birthday. It was a sermon that he had been subjected to all too many times before.

"You will too, as will your son and grandson after you. This is the way of the men of the Hawthorn family." That was the end of the issue; no further debate was to be had. It was tradition; in fact, that very word was inscribed, in capital letters for understated emphasis, on the family crest.

Facing no other alternatives or more accurately none that were more palatable than the one presented, off to college Francis had went, leaving his family and his friends behind, perhaps forever for his new life of slavery and punishment.

He would then march incessantly and practice his drill endlessly. Cadet Hawthorn was taught to shoot, and then he repeated the former two pursuits. Occasionally, he would be made to stand at attention in extremes of heat and cold for uncountable hours, or be ordered to wander for days through the English

countryside with meagrely rationed food and inadequate water. Then, he would return to his typical regimen of those aforementioned three activities. To his great displeasure, Francis had the supplementary privilege, whilst he improved his deficiencies in all of these matters of spending further time with the Sergeant, who never seemed to tire of such seeming triviality.

In addition, there had also been the topic of his more formal education. Not merely was Cadet Hawthorn expected, and to which he was certainly unaccustomed, to endure such strenuous physical exertion, he was also required to grasp the concepts of advanced mathematics and memorize collections of romantic poetry; he found an odd irony in that last assignment.

Needless to say, but said nonetheless, Francis was not a very happy fellow. Indeed, the truth was, there were few among the new cadets who genuinely enjoyed their internment. As boys are wont to do under those sorts of circumstances, they expressed their disappointment bodily toward each other; unfortunately for the subject of this narrative, this aggression was directed primarily at Francis.

Regrettably, in spite of the Sergeant's best efforts, there appeared to be no making a soldier out of the young Hawthorn. His inability to march in step and move in time were detrimental to his division's scores; this provided no benefit to aid in his receiving a peaceful night's sleep. 'Lights out' came far too soon for Francis, and the grace of dawn arrived much too late. The Brigadier became quite aware of his pupil's troubles, and he spent a great deal of time with the cadet striving to work through his shortcomings.

Sadly, those efforts were all to no avail. Francis simply could not be convinced to adapt to the baser side of Army life, and did not possess the strength, nor the skill required to be successful at any sort of general infantry training.

To Francis, the Army seemed to be comprised mostly of contradictions. For example, it was counterproductive, he conveyed in frustration to the Brigadier during one of their numerous 'talks,' to beat someone senseless in the name of 'discipline' that was already having difficulty performing physical tasks. Hawthorn would not directly state this to the Brigadier, but it seemed quite clear to the deeply frustrated boy that logic and the military were rather distant relatives to each other; he was certain not to expect much of the former from the latter.

Soon however, it was revealed, and to his good fortune that Cadet Hawthorn had in the eyes of the Royal Army a 'saving grace;' his extraordinary abilities at academics substantially outweighed his numerous other shortcomings. The military mind had turned in recent years to consider such acumen of greater importance than sheer might and bravery. His lecturers had

felt that Francis was extremely intelligent; perhaps, they had informed the Brigadier, the boy was even a genius. They strongly urged their commander to take immediate action, lest the prodigy suffer debilitating harm at the hands of his fellows.

Less than one full year into his study, Cadet Hawthorn was transferred, at the insistence and to the great satisfaction of the Brigadier, to the Royal Army College of Engineers. Despite his failure to complete basic military training, it was felt by the hierarchy above that, rather than risk losing such brilliance to one of the dangers the more physical side of his initiation might instigate, Francis could instead exercise his mental prowess to further the aims and goals of the Crown and, by extension, the British Empire.

There were fewer beatings in the bunkhouses; this was a fact for which Francis held great appreciation. He engaged in his new studies with vigour; Francis had even elected to take up the violin, which served to improve not only his drill, but also his marching and his marksmanship. Cadet Hawthorn graduated at the top of his class and the matured young man entered the Army Corps of Engineers as a Lieutenant. The Brigadier himself attended the ceremony, to bestow his rank upon Francis and congratulate the new officer on his accomplishments.

For his part, Francis only wished to go home; he longed to visit his family, his friends and, most importantly, Caroline Camberwell. She was a girl of whom he did not realize he was quite so fond until he was sent away from her.

Francis could not wait to see her; he had a great deal to say, but he could only tell her in person. A letter simply would not do for such a sensitive topic; the Lieutenant desperately needed to inform her of how he felt, and to impress upon her how he had always considered her. However, and much to his personal devastation, his desired rendezvous was simply not to be. Disturbances in South Africa required him to be deployed straight away, to a foreign land at the bottom of the globe; Francis was sent far away from his friends, his family and, foremost of all, Caroline Camberwell.

War is Hell.

It is easy to type those words onto a piece of paper, or state them dramatically in a political speech with no real comprehension as to their true import. The meaning is not that war is similar to that demonic realm; the gist is that warfare, on a field of battle and with machinated weaponry in particular really is Hell or, at the very least, it is the best simulation of Hades that any poor soul could ever have the grave misfortune to experience.

In such affairs, a large number of people tend to die in a very unhappy manner, and they are typically quite vocal about it when they do; when presented

with such anguish, those not yet facing their demise tend to wish that they already had.

Lieutenant Francis Hawthorn, fresh from the Royal Army College of Engineers, found himself confronted with this cruel reality. Previous to the American Civil War, wars had been 'cleaner;' they had been more regimented and 'gentlemanly.' That is not to state that those affairs were not terrible; however, it took the repeating gun, mustard gas and incendiary bombs to raise the atrocities of military combat to new plateaus. The Second Boer War would prove to be a vile sample of the horrific future soon to follow.

As if that were not enough for the forlorn Lieutenant, South Africa was hot, humid and infested with insects, snakes and all manner of other lovely creatures that could kill as much as look at you. The heat was oppressive, and the humidity sapped what remained of the young man's spirits; Lieutenant Hawthorn could not for the life of him fathom why they were there, what they were fighting for, or what all their pain and suffering was in cause of.

Francis would witness a great many things that he would much rather have foregone. The British were endeavouring to extract their enemy from the rough terrain in which the rebels had taken refuge; Lieutenant Hawthorn was pressed upon to quickly survey roads and design bridges so that their mechanical armaments would be granted the opportunity to mobilize into these areas and, in true colonial fashion, decimate their opponents. Many times, fighting would rage about him as he attempted to calculate the figures he needed; on more than one occasion his life, and the lives of those with whom he collaborated, came under direct threat.

The most perilous of these incidents occurred when a guerrilla sniper caused one of his greatest fears to come to realization; Francis was shot in his left leg. It had been quickly concluded that his injury would not require the amputation of his limb, but this victory was tempered with the reality that medical treatment under field conditions was far less than pleasant. Fond memories were not made of the experience.

As one might imagine, Francis had then wanted to depart from that particular theatre of warfare as promptly as possible.

While he recovered, in a crude 'hospital' that consisted merely of tents and latrines, Francis contemplated, as he did rather frequently, on the subject of composing a letter to Caroline; unfortunately, he found himself unable to form any words on the paper that could provide proper justice to his emotions. He resolved once again that his only choice was to tell her of his intentions in person.

The Lieutenant was uncertain what his prospects would be if Caroline had found a suitor, or worse had been married; these thoughts had haunted

Francis with a greater intensity than even those of the grim spectre of war. He would firmly assert to himself that if his feelings were those attributed to true love, she would feel the same, and wait for his return. His colleagues told him that they were certain he was quite mad; of course, no woman would wait for a man she had not been courted by, and to whom she had not said even a single word in over three years. Particularly not, his fellows would quip, if the man in question were Francis Hawthorn.

Despite their pessimism, Francis was stalwart; if his convictions were a 'flight of fancy' then they were his delusions to have. They could take their taunts and, not terribly respectfully, shove off.

It was certainly far more constructive to concentrate on the remote possibility that his love for Caroline might be requited, than it was to focus on his wounded leg which was, for a very long time, quite painful. To dwell upon grim memories that would never be forgotten of fellow soldiers being blown to pieces in his presence was not productive, recollections such as those of the blood of his comrades, as war raged around them, spilling quite vividly over his drafting table.

To revisit the horrors that had led him to be so incomprehensibly terrified on numerous occasions was not preferable.

A post from home had informed Francis of the sad news that James Camberwell, Caroline's father, had died; he would decide to deliver his condolences in person. Days later, word came that his brother, an infantry commander had, in a protracted battle, been severely injured; he lay dying fewer than one hundred miles away. Francis was lamentably unable to go to him; recovered, his skills were urgently required in the conflict still at hand. His sibling had lived how he had played cricket; he was a good all-rounder, had not been beyond cussing, or cheating if he could get away with it. Regardless, he had played in the spirit of the game, and Francis would miss him very much.

Soldiers arrived and then they died; in the interim, Francis would practice his violin. The roster of his colleagues was revised many times, due to either reassignment, injury or, all too frequently, death. Despite this, his resolve was maintained; he would have the temerity to survive this war accordingly and would then return to his beloved Caroline, proving to her the strength of his love.

All Francis wished for in life was to be with Caroline; if his love was unrequited, he did not know how he could carry on.

The war eventually drew to a close, and Lieutenant Hawthorn was discharged from his duties as a result of the wound to his leg. Francis was released from the Army, having acquired a limp and nagging pain. He was going home; he would visit, finally, his love Caroline. During that voyage, he constantly questioned himself; he considered the notion that he had made an idol of her,

and pondered whether she truly would be how he remembered her. The fantasies partaken on hundreds of sleepless nights had blurred his memory; they made it difficult to discern reality from his delusions.

Furthermore, Francis wondered if he could make her happy in her wants, or if she would make him contented in his restless spirit, and if bliss would be found together. All he knew was that in his heart he was convinced that they would.

That was enough for him.

The former Lieutenant Hawthorn chose to revisit his family first; he would mourn the passing of his brother with them, and then inquire for news concerning Caroline with which he could further prepare himself for when he ultimately would make his advance upon the Camberwell family farm. He was troubled to learn of her relationship with the banker, Andrew; Francis was hesitant, and puzzled as to how Caroline could have committed such an act of betrayal.

Uncertain regarding whether she did still, or no longer loved him, he became doubtful that the courage could be mustered to make known to her his renewed presence. Eventually, Francis came to the conclusion that he well and truly had absolutely nothing to lose by doing so.

As he rather timidly rode his horse towards the Camberwell estate, the retired officer battled a private war inside his mind; he procrastinated by devising and revising tactics with which he could do battle with the woman, or contingency plans for if he might flee. Inevitably, he would arrive there; Francis would find her as he had remembered, and discern that she was pleased to see him. He had attained then a sense of contentment that he had not felt for a very long time.

Francis's endless ponderings had caused his appearance at the farm to be quite late; he had thought it inappropriate to make such professions at that advanced hour. Caroline encouraged him, due to his tardiness, to spend the night at the house and he appreciatively complied with her request. The next day, she informed Francis that it would be quite acceptable if he wished to remain for a time; he could assist Caroline, while she tended to her ailing mother, with the multitude of projects around the farm that required attention. The man needed little convincing; he was quite delighted to be of service to his one true love.

Days became weeks, and turned into a month; all the while, Francis was unable to bring himself to profess his love to Caroline. He was afraid; he feared that she would turn him away. His heart would then be broken, and his aspirations for their future together would be destroyed. While he enjoyed every moment that she graced him with her presence, he would continue to schedule

moments at which he vowed to broach the topic of his affections; those would then pass, without his compliance.

One morning, Francis received a letter from a former Army colleague inquiring if the retired Lieutenant would be interested in assisting him with the management of an engineering firm in London that he had recently founded. Considering this promising development, and further taking into account the rapidly dwindling state of the Camberwell family finances, Francis chose to use the offer of employment as the foundation of his proposal; he would suggest that Caroline leave the farm, and form a partnership with him as husband and wife.

To his great relief and profound elation, she emphatically agreed. There followed a simple wedding; he purchased a house and, suffering from dementia, Caroline's mother was institutionalized. The vultures of the Camberwell family would each dispute their particular rights over the abandoned property while the couple embarked together upon on a bright new chapter in both of their lives.

Francis had his happiness; the two could not have possibly seen greater joy. They had found true love, a gift that is so rarely encountered. Years passed in married bliss; they laughed, cried, celebrated and mourned. She would play her piano, and he would perform with his violin; each would make beautiful music with, and for, the other.

They lived, as only such blessed are able; Francis and Caroline Hawthorn were certain that, together, they would stay always in paradise.

It was so until, one cold, Christmas Eve morning; a regretful soldier arrived to cast a shadow on their happy door, their celebrations and the remainder of what should have been their wonderful life.

CHAPTER SIX

A WELCOME ADDITION

SHE HAD BEEN FORCED TO SELL THE HOUSE; she soon no longer had the means required to remain in it. There had been a memorial service for her lost husband, attended by Francis's family and their small group of friends; then, it was if her life had proceeded to make an abrupt halt. Months, then years went by as Caroline stagnated in her depression without writing a single word.

Aside from a small widower's pension she was receiving no income, and the fees for her mother's care still required payment; with her savings spent, there had been no alternative. Furthermore, staying in her marital home was becoming rather intolerable. She was glad to be free of it.

Caroline did not take the piano when she left; other than a few pieces of furniture, she sold the entire contents of the house for a pittance at auction to an anonymous third party. She was not concerned for the items were memorabilia of a past that she did not wish to continue to carry with her. Their stories hurt her more than she could bear, and Caroline was content to be rid of them. The grieving widow wished that she could wipe the memories of her marriage completely from her mind, starting fresh and anew, but she admitted that such a notion was an impracticable one. The cruelty that the world had committed against her and her beloved Francis would be entrenched eternally within her soul.

Nevertheless, the woman, at a minimum, would do her utmost not to be reminded of it. Caroline sought around London for a small flat; she desired to locate one in a quiet area, where she could hide herself away from the world and from anything, or anyone that could hurt her, in order that she could be left to wallow in perfect security within her despair. It was not long before she found her new home; it was rather small, but Caroline had no need of unnecessary space. It was presently just herself in her party.

The dwelling was located in a less-respectable part of London, on the highest storey of a shabby structure but the neighbourhood was not so squalid that it fell into the category of an area of ill repute. A Chinese greengrocer owned the block, a man named Mister Kao whose shop occupied the ground level. Her remaining possessions were moved, and the house was quickly sold; both it and the piano were relegated to her past. The tales that they told held memories that Caroline deeply despised.

Then, she had plenty of peace and quiet. In fact, the flat was so silent the tranquillity began to leisurely drive Caroline toward madness. The sound of her father's mantle clock, set over the fireplace in the sitting room that no one ever sat in, was her only company. That was present and herself, with whom she chose to speak often.

She needed a companion, but not human; that sort of acquaintance tended to ask unwanted questions. The woman would require an animal. Caroline decided that she would obtain a pet. In this way, she could converse with it, whilst keeping up the vague appearance of sanity.

Much to her exasperation, dogs loathed Caroline; that species was immediately withdrawn from her consideration. At any opportunity, they would growl and even snap at her; they would bark at her from their yards and the opposite side of the street. The creatures, if given liberty to roam, would merrily chase her down otherwise harmless walking paths; generally, to demonstrate their sharp antagonism for Caroline's existence, the miserable beasts would employ whatever methods available to them.

As to the basis of their scorn, she had no notions; the animals had made it quite clear that their opinion, despite Caroline making her best attempts at being kind, was not changeable. She was, to the canine world, permanently 'personae non gratae.' Obviously, her family's efforts when she was a child to keep a dog had been a complete and total catastrophe; they had taken instead to having a cat.

The feline had served to keep the farm's mouse population under strict control; however, it never warmed to Caroline, and the young girl never took to it. Cats seemed too aloof to her. They were too distant, and indifferent for her to pay any notice to them in return. Despite James's argument that it was the "philosopher of the animal kingdom," and his ongoing encouragement that his daughter befriend the creature, she could not tolerate its apathetic nature; she disregarded it as intensely as it discounted her.

No rapport had ever developed, whilst she grew older, between the child and the many cats her family housed. Currently, though, she had come to think that having such a pet would be a distinct improvement in company over the ominous, repetitive ticking that exclusively filled the void of silence inside her

flat, and the chimes that reminded her of the relentless passage of time. The chosen goal of the clock on the mantle was apparently to rob her of her sanity gradually, as if striving to drive away an unwanted human invader.

To it, it seemed Caroline was nothing more than a mere household pest; given those circumstances, she decided that it was unquestionably worth undertaking such an experiment. Thus, 'Operation Find-a-Feline' began.

Caroline spent the next several weeks travelling all over London; she viewed vast numbers of kittens, of all shapes, sizes, breeds and colours. There was Siamese and there were tabbies; Persians and Himalayans were considered. They were black, white, brown, orange and silver; additionally, there were all conceivable combinations of those. Some of them were small and perky, and others fat and lazy. At the viewings, the kittens would sit, and stare up at their potential adopters with their cute little pussycat eyes, their gaze hoping to prompt those in attendance to take them home.

Unfortunately, it looked as though only other humans were desirable to be their guardians, for no kitten warmed to the widow; the search grew increasingly desperate as the weeks went by. It was not that Caroline did not appreciate animals; she simply did not feel any kinship towards them. It was as if they sensed her self-imposed distance and in kind chose to steer clear of her. It appeared that for Caroline to find a fur-bearing flat mate it would take a miracle.

The woman desperately wished for a companion with whom she would no longer be alone; all she wanted was someone who could take away her loneliness, and give her some comfort.

Early one warm summer evening, the night of her forty-second birthday in fact, she ventured to an older home in a middle-class residential neighbourhood far to the other side of the city in response to a mysterious flyer that had been placed into her mailbox regarding the urgent adoption of a litter of ginger-tabby kittens. It would likely be Caroline's last opportunity to find a pet as she was coming perilously close to abandoning all hope that she would ever meet a cat that would take any interest in her; she went anyhow. Her expectations had already diminished, by the dismal lack in her previous efforts of any accomplishment, to approximately naught.

The housekeeper answered Caroline's knock at the door; she introduced herself as Missus Glenferrie, who then stated that she regretted to inform her visitor that all of the kittens were all adopted out. She profusely apologized for the inconvenience imposed upon the author, and expressed her remorse that the woman had come such a distance for nothing.

The thwarted novelist had no birthday cards, gifts nor revelry and she would also have no kitten; it made for a feeble footnote to a forgettable anniversary.

Caroline must have looked rather crestfallen for Missus Glenferrie was moved to stop her before she turned away, then insisting that the woman wait. It had apparently slipped the housekeeper's mind that there was one kitten left, but she noted cautiously that he had previously taken to none of the other applicants. Although she was quite certain the cat would not show any interest in Caroline either, she felt there would be no harm in her making his acquaintance nonetheless. Missus Glenferrie brought her houseguest into the entrance hallway, and had the woman sit whilst she searched for the remaining tabby.

Many minutes then passed. Caroline overheard the elderly woman curse on numerous occasions whilst she moved through the house on the hunt for the wayward kitten.

"It'll just take a minute," she would hear the Scotswoman call out cheerfully, then several of those would march by; each would contain snippets of further cussing, and the housekeeper would repeat her assurance once again.

Caroline was preparing to abandon the apparently futile exercise when the housekeeper finally reappeared; the misplaced kitten was in her arms, and she was prepared to evaluate whether there was any potential, or even any remote possibility of pairing the two.

The kitten was so incredibly fat that Caroline chuckled at the mere sight of it. He looked as if when he walked the fur on his belly polished the floor, and that if he lost his step he would become marooned, bouncing on the ground like a four-legged tennis ball. In short, he was the most adorable creature that she had ever seen. The applicant for his adoption took the ginger-tabby kitten in her arms and, as she cradled him on his back as if he were an infant, he gazed up at her happily with his striking blue eyes and made only a single unspoken request.

He wished to know if Caroline would furnish him with his required quantity of food.

She smiled, and then nodded; the terms of his affection she had felt were quite easily met, and the tabby purred; his tongue emerged from his mouth, slightly. The kitten was quite willing to show his love for this kind human who had promised to keep his vast belly full, and his endless hunger satisfied.

"What is his name?" she asked of the housekeeper, who seemed to be taken aback by the fat little kitten's display of friendliness towards the woman.

“Edward,” Missus Glenferrie stammered, rather in a state of shock. However, she further told Caroline wistfully, the Scotswoman had recently grown fond of referring to the tiny, overweight troublemaker as ‘the fatty cuss.’

Caroline’s literary mind mulled the term of endearment over, for a moment and, reminded of the decadent Roman Emperors of antiquity, she visualized an equivalent personification of the kitten. It was one in which he lounged on a Latin couch, and savoured tiny fish administered to him by naked servant girls; his stomach was as immense as her imagination and her sensibilities would allow.

“Fatticus.” Caroline announced the kitten’s new name as if it were a firm statement of fact, and the ginger-tabby made his reply by purring with even greater enthusiasm; the covenant between the two was then sealed. Missus Glenferrie reluctantly chose to allow the kitten to go, and to relinquish the one of whom over the preceding few months she had grown so fond, the feline that had been a cause of such great joy and resounding aggravation.

That night, Fatticus left with Caroline; the old housekeeper stood in the doorway, and watched tearfully as the pair walked down the street, until they could be seen no longer.

She would truly miss that terrible little cat.

The newfound duo went home, to the flat that would no longer be quite so empty to Caroline, and the dwelling that was a wondrous new world for Emperor Fatticus to explore. Caroline was overjoyed to finally have someone to care for, with whom to converse and maybe one day even to love; the kitten would be a companion with which she could pass the hours that went by of late far too slowly.

Their shared arrangement, that of the sad widow who wanted someone to feed, and the ravenous little creature who needed a charitable hand to foster him, would be quite mutually beneficial; indeed, it was the finest birthday present that the woman could ever have received.

She slept well that evening; the kitten was curled up on the foot of the bed. His stomach had been satisfied by a midnight snack of tuna and cream, compliments of Mister Kao, which had been shared together at the kitchen table by both human and feline. Caroline dreamt of happier days that had come before, and Fatticus fantasized of joyful days that lay ahead; neither of them felt alone. They were together now, a woman and her cat, bonded by their needs and necessities.

This realization comforted them both; they each slumbered, quite peacefully, for the entire night.

As the early dawn crept its way through the curtains, Fatticus woke up; soon, his imbued curiosity swiftly got the better of him. He was quickly called upon to begin his expedition; every square inch of his latest residence would need, by his well-trained feline eye, to be meticulously scrutinized. For Fatticus to be master over this domain, he would have to know all there was of it; every potential supply of food and prospective source of amusement had to be located, identified and catalogued so that he could then exploit those resources to their fullest.

A stretch and a yawn signalled the little kitten's resolution to rouse his ginger-haired carcass, and make preparations to break camp; Fatticus would need to repeat the ritual twice more before he would finally be free of the cocoon of slumber that had encased him. First, would come the mandatory step of transiting from the bed to the floor; the kitten quite carefully considered the leap to the hardwood surface below, plotting the correct trajectory and calculating the exact force required to make both a graceful descent and a pleasant landing.

Then, he sank as if a sack full of marbles, abruptly falling directly downwards and crashing with a painful thud onto his backside; the consequences of his plunge were only slightly cushioned by his excess padding.

Any landing one walks away from is a good one; at least, that was how Fatticus would choose to look upon his most recent endeavour. He shortly recovered from the effects of his practically perfect descent, and became instantly enamoured with the land under the mattress; his light-sensitive eyes stared deeply into the darkness that reigned over it. He observed a spooky shadow world, one populated with ghostly outlines of mysterious objects, and bizarre sounds of which he was unfamiliar.

Something moved lazily in the darkness, dancing in eerie silence from one dark silhouette to another and gliding, with no obvious effort, from one place to the next. One moment, Fatticus had stood in the sunlight outside, a kitten transfixed with a new plaything; the following instant, the spectre had taken his feline instinct to chase it by the tail and dragged it, and him under the bed, into the place of perpetual night in pursuit of a prey that as yet had no name.

Fatticus promptly came to the appalling realization that he was alone in the dark and, summoned to crush him with the tremendous weight of its inconsequential nothingness, it rapidly closed in as if a deathly black fog around him. While the oblivion made its attempts to suffocate him, he trembled; then, the kitten struggled to gather his wits and fend off the darkness while he surveyed the void in search of his victim, the carefree spectre that had made the crucial mistake of enticing the kitten into its home underneath the bed.

The cat located it, as it jumped yet again from behind one nameless object to another; he then began his stalk, slowly creeping towards the

mysterious creature's hiding place, trying his best to evade discovery and avoid spooking his prey so that he could pounce, and surprise the creature. Before it had a chance to act he would already have fulfilled his purpose and made his breakfast of the phantom; his tummy would be a tad happier, and the dark world below a little safer.

He swooped suddenly towards the spirit; his target sailed away from him in response, gliding gleefully as if, with its show of disrespect, taunting him. This light-hearted attitude, despite the gravity of his prey's present circumstances, incensed the little hunter; regarding the reason the creature refused to demonstrate any alarm, Fatticus had no comprehension. He did mean to eat it; perhaps the spectre failed to understand that most important of facts. The kitten leapt again, and once more his adversary jumped away, bouncing and fluttering along with neither worry nor care ahead of him.

His anger, growing exponentially with his frustration, soon took control of him; Fatticus became increasingly erratic in his attacks, hastily leaping with all of his strength into the darkness after his quarry, and crashing into the vague bric-a-brac that inhabited the shadowy landscape. Off them, as if he were a ginger-tinted, fur-upholstered pinball he would bounce from one to the next, in his never-ending quest to defeat the phantasm that persisted to evade him.

Roused by the commotion that emanated from beneath her bed, Caroline awoke unexpectedly; an odd percussion, consisting of thumps, crashes and growls drifted up raucously from below. What was taking place she could easily imagine; the woman poked her head over the side of the bed, down within view of the proceedings to confirm her speculation and witness her fat little feline, with all the vigour that his youth could provide, chase around a dust bunny.

"FATTICUS!" she eventually snapped at him; the kitten abruptly ceased his activities, turned toward the source of his distraction and blinked at Caroline in confusion, as if returning to a long forgotten, but familiar place. The cat was befuddled. "Fatticus," she repeated, "what exactly are you up to?"

He was no longer himself certain; Fatticus sauntered nonchalantly over to the periphery of the land underneath the bed, where Caroline then picked him up and elevated him once more to the top of the mattress.

"Crazy kitten," she admonished him, whilst stroking him behind the ear in a way that Fatticus enjoyed very much. "You will unquestionably fit in around here."

"Breakfast?" she soon asked him; it was a query that, at least to Fatticus, seemed completely unnecessary. The anticipation in his eyes gave to Caroline his definite reply; she then sat up, donned her housecoat, picked up the famished kitten and carried him toward the kitchen, in an undertaking that would soon see

him fed. This caused the brave little explorer to believe that, in the end, his early morning adventure had been rather worthwhile.

Fatticus had then decided, regarding the itinerant ghost underneath the bed, to make no further efforts. One day, victory would be his; he would vanquish it, and rule supreme. Until then, he would choose to find his breakfast elsewhere.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A TERRIBLE WAR

THUNDER AND LIGHTNING had provided an eerie backdrop to Captain Hawthorn's tales while the Army lorry, its cargo that of the officer and his men lurched over the desolate French landscape; his anecdotes served for his weary soldiers as some much-needed diversion. The Captain regaled them with slightly adapted accounts of his time in South Africa; these contained descriptions of harsh conditions and fearsome wildlife, as well as details of his military campaigns. He loved to embellish his narratives and, in order to capture the interest of his charges, would not hesitate to invent complete fabrications.

"Moments after I had been shot in the leg," the Captain began, as he moved to relate a somewhat fictional retelling of the incident responsible for his limp, "I endeavoured to seek out my assailant. It was not at all long before I located the fiend who had shot me, the coward positioned up on a hilly perch some hundred yards above. I took hold of my pistol and, whilst bleeding profusely from the wound the man had done me, I stalwartly began to start up the hill towards him, much to his great astonishment."

Captain Hawthorn smiled broadly, "He fired at me; however, his shot was wide, the man having possibly been robbed of his nerve by my advance. He took aim at me yet again, and he missed once more."

While his men eagerly awaited their officer to resume his narrative, Francis took a prolonged nip from his flask. "His rifle sounded another discharge, and for a third time the sniper was far off of his mark. It was starting to appear as if it had been a miracle the incompetent fool had succeeded in wounding me the first time. I was almost on him then, but having become terribly weak from the loss of blood, I knew my chance to act was short. I attained the height occupied by my attacker and, as he brought himself to his feet, stood in front of him triumphantly. Then, I shot him in the chest, spun him around and sent him rolling down the hill to my fellows below, who finished the blighter off."

His men cheered and applauded politely, then lamented the sniper's lack of further success. The officer took the teasing in stride. He was not the sort of officer that would deny his men such liberties, and he was confident that their jests were simply poor expressions of humour.

Francis carried on with his storytelling, captivating the soldiers with a distinctly tall-tale of an imaginary session of hand-to-hand combat, his opponent that of an African lion that during the night had entered his tent. According to the Captain, after the man had simply struck it on the nose, the vicious creature, as if a frightened housecat, had fled. Other notable accounts included his harrowing escape from a stampede of elephants, and a near fatal confrontation with a Zulu tribesman.

All of these tales were complete and utter rubbish, but had served to take all of their thoughts away from the work soon to be at hand. Supply roads to the front needed to change often, and this required units such as Captain Hawthorn's to survey new routes into the field of battle. It was not an easy task; bullets from repeating guns could travel a long distance and injure a man felt to be well within the realm of safety. The German biplane also posed a new and deadly threat that was capable of wreaking havoc far inside Allied territory.

They were all listed as 'non-combat' personnel, said to be fortunate to have been spared the horrors of the front; however, this distinction was not, in practice, comforting to the men. In fact, the infantrymen would commonly tease the surveyors by referring to them with colourful metaphors, such as 'sitting ducks,' 'cannon fodder' and the like. Unfortunately, they were assigned little if any security to watch while the surveyors conducted their operations for enemy soldiers and, as a result, Captain Hawthorn's men were quite often injured.

Even further still, they frequently found themselves, since the lorries that carried them would not, lest they fall victim to aircraft remain, having to walk for miles in order to find medical aid. Ambulances were apparently only meant to retrieve wounded soldiers from the front, and not to provide assistance for those in supporting roles that were considered 'safe' on same 'friendly' soil that their own transport would refuse for any length of time to occupy.

In spite of these dangers, his men performed their assignments well; Francis, the boy who had been a terrible soldier, had grown into a man who made an excellent officer. He maintained the moral of his unit by engaging them in thoughtful conversation, discussions in matters of philosophy, history, and of the importance of the conflict in which they were unwilling participants.

The amateur violinist would also perform for his charges; his expertise, after a decade of practice with the instrument, had become quite exceptional.

Captain Hawthorn would quickly order his men to withdraw from situations that were too dangerous. His frequent retreats soon earned himself the nickname of 'Captain Fanny' from fellow officers; it was a moniker that, since it indicated his unwillingness to unnecessarily risk the lives of his men, he would be proud of. As a result of those merits, he was loved by the soldiers, and served well in return by his men.

Many a crucial advance saw success, and many a soldier's life was saved due to the painstaking efforts of both the survey units, and the engineers that led them.

The apologetic soldier had come to the door of the Hawthorn residence on Christmas Eve morning, Nineteen Hundred and Fourteen; a letter was in his hand. It explained to the retired officer that an order had been issued by the Crown stating that he was to be recalled to service so that he may aid in Britain's struggle against Germany. His commission had been returned to him, and he would give for compensation his service to King and country in what would come to be known as 'The Great War.'

Francis, certain that his injury from the previous conflict would prove him exempt, protested quite emphatically; however, the soldier informed him that the physical requirements for officers had been reduced, and they were no longer required to meet the medical criteria established for enlisted, or soon to be conscripted, men.

The understandably distraught Caroline, in considerable and graphic detail made her disagreements known to the soldier. She then quite literally crumpled up, and threw the letter into the poor man's face. As futile an act as that display may have been, the woman demanded angrily that he leave the couple be, and never return. Afterwards, she cried.

Caroline sobbed, while Francis did what he could to comfort her, for hours; he strived to persuade his wife that all would be well, and that no mere bullet could ever prevent him from coming back to her. However, she was completely inconsolable, and unreceptive to his pleas for calm.

Christmas Eve, the Day marking the birth of their Saviour, and the celebration of charity that followed all arrived and departed, before Caroline came finally to accept the revised terms of her reality; it was an existence that she chose to face with artificial apathy. Her vast love for Francis made completely intolerable the idea that his life was to be placed in such peril; her only compromise was to attempt a reduction in the level of affection that she felt for her husband.

As a result, she was forced to withdraw from him, not entirely, but to a safe middle ground where Caroline was still aware of their bond. She could then

face the possibility that, from the theatre of war which he would soon be forced to attend, Francis may never return.

It would be six long months before the Army allowed Francis leave to visit his home, and see his wife. He wrote Caroline a letter informing her of his impending arrival, and she burned a candle in the window every night until his return. For a fortnight, they told each other of their pursuits during his prolonged absence. She read for him from her latest tragic wartime romance novel, one that contained a dashing hero that Francis had greatly inspired. He charmed her with somewhat embellished accounts of his bravery in the face of all the death and destruction that he had witnessed unfold at the Western front.

They held each other, laughed and cried; then all too soon Captain Hawthorn was forced to leave his wife yet again, to return to his duties and play his part in the war that, it was claimed, would mark the end of all such conflict. Caroline re-donned her mask of indifference, and resumed her inner struggle to constrain her emotions while she waited for another letter that would signal her husband's impending return, correspondence that would give cause to burn another candle in the window.

There would be several more of those as the frightful hostilities proceeded with painful dawdling towards their eventual conclusion.

He would not be with her on Christmas again until the holiday of 1917. Francis had been unexpectedly granted a precious few days of leave. It was barely long enough to hurriedly return to England, spending Christmas dinner with Caroline and his relations at the Hawthorn estate; before becoming tardy, he would then make a frantic journey back to his unit. When she received the telegram that heralded his Yuletide presence, Caroline was overjoyed; her true love was eagerly awaited at his childhood home. Time was passed, whilst the festive meal was prepared, by conversing with Francis's mother and father; day slowly crept into night, and she performed carols on the family's slightly mal-tuned piano.

By recounting rather shameful anecdotes regarding their son, his parents eased the mounting anxieties of their guest. If Francis had been there, he would have been quite embarrassed; it was fortunate that he was not. The hour grew late, the sky came dark and the Captain failed to make an appearance. Although they were forced by hunger to start Christmas dinner without him, Mother Hawthorn reassured the progressively more worried Caroline that her son would soon be present.

As Mister Hawthorn stood at the head of the table, and moved to carve the first slice of roast goose the overdue officer, with all the dramatic flair of an East End stage production, made his much-anticipated entrance.

Francis then, with all the zeal of a starved man at a banquet, kissed Caroline; he performed his lewd display of affection in front of an audience that consisted of his entire clan. The children turned shades of pink, and covered their eyes, while the women strove to make the modest appearance of averting their gaze. The men, on the other hand, were content to gawk openly at the spectacle; broad smiles were affixed to their faces as they watched the Captain take what was his.

There were giggles, then laughter and finally applause. When the lovesick pair had finished reuniting, they all sat down for a meal of goose, pudding and all of the other typical trimmings. It was to be one of the finest Christmas suppers in recent memory.

While they ate, the discussion quickly turned to that of the war; they all made enquiries of Francis regarding the situation at the front, and begged him to bring them up to date on the state of the campaign. The Captain worked to lift their spirits, and informed his family of recent Allied victories; he told them of new British strategies that were expected to bring a swift end to the brutal conflict. At least, the ones at which, he said, he was at liberty to discuss with civilians.

"To Captain Francis Hawthorn," his father declared proudly as he stood to toast his son, "the finest military man this family has ever had as a member."

Francis blushed a deep shade of red while his family resoundingly cheered the toast. As to if his father was truly aware of just how much those words meant to his son, or if he had any comprehension of the weight that they carried within the officer's heart, the Captain was uncertain.

Regardless, it was by far the best Christmas present Francis could ever receive from the man, and was perhaps the greatest gift he had been given by anyone.

"To Mister Hawthorn," Caroline, a moment later, whispered in his ear, "the finest husband this woman could ever have." Francis became flush again, his cheeks soon turning to an odd hue of purple. He reconsidered; perhaps his father's present was in fact the second best, having been knocked from its brief stint in top position by the praise of the one for whom he cared for the most.

He was urged to give a speech in response; Francis rose, to deliver his reply. The tone in his voice was grave, and serious; "When I was ferried off to military school," he began, "I was convinced that, to deserve such an terrible punishment, I must have committed a truly heinous act." He looked sternly at his father and, for a few tense moments, silence fell across the table; Francis then promptly broke his stern expression with a grin and, almost instantly, his teeth were displayed in a broad show of mirth.

“I soon learned that I had been correct; I had made the appalling mistake of being born a Hawthorn.”

The Captain winked at his father and his thoroughly infuriated ancestor soon came to the joyful realization that his son had actually been making a dreadful attempt at humour. With an appreciative sigh, Mister Hawthorn relaxed, waving his finger at Francis, and making insincere threats to take the itinerant boy over his knee. There was a good deal of laughter, and celebration; the revelry continued for quite some time.

After dinner had concluded, Francis and Caroline would excuse themselves and, while the ‘Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy’ played on the Hawthorn family gramophone, the officer and his wife retired to an upstairs bedroom, where they would hold each other and while the remainder of the evening away. He told her that he was to be promoted, and assigned to a more critical role; there would be more pay for her as a result. Caroline cried, and protested that it would only be more perilous; the additional money was unwanted. She only desired for him to be safe; he held her, and once again reiterated his vow, regardless of what transpired on the battlefield, to return to her.

His news had made for a bittersweet reunion. In the early light of dawn, Francis would depart, to make a revisiting of the war, and resume an uncertain fate.

“I will come back to you,” he told her, as he readied to mount his steed. “My beautiful bride, I will forever return for you. I could never stay away.”

“Is that a promise?” She sobbed, “I do not wish for you to go. I never want you to leave me again. It is not fair.”

“It is a guarantee. Regardless of whatever happens, I will always be with you. Until the very end of time.” He gave her one final, mournful kiss, and mounted his horse; then, he rode off, back to the war and away from his precious Caroline.

He was given a battlefield promotion to Colonel; Colonel Hawthorn took it with all the respect and honour with which it deserved. He was to then manage several survey teams; he would move between them, assisting them when they required his aid, maintaining discipline within their ranks and ensuring that their assignments were completed on schedule. Francis was an exceptionally well-regarded officer; he took great pride in his troops, and was quite adept in his capacity to lead them.

The fight was turning to the Allies favour; victory appeared to be a certainty. It was approaching the end of winter, in early 1918.

Francis then, when warfare was temporarily reduced, returned home briefly. He and Caroline began to draw up their plans jointly for how their lives, after the war had ended, would continue. The couple discussed adoption; they debated the need for a larger house. He considered remaining in the military, to instruct in engineering in the same academy at which, so many years before, he had been educated. They pondered a great many possibilities, and compared visions of a future that would be peaceful and happy, in which they would never again be separated. This time they truly would have the rest of their lives together.

Making his return to the continent for what they hoped would be the final occasion, Francis tearfully kissed his beloved farewell; then, he walked down his garden path, and vanished into history. That image would be the last that Caroline would have of him; neither would she hear any further from her husband.

The happiness of their love would no longer be known to her; she was to experience only the pain and sadness of bereavement and loss.

A letter regretting his death arrived at the Hawthorn residence in late October 1918; it came mere weeks before a proper end to the hostilities would be announced. In a matter of days, he would have been secure in his home, safe and sound; instead, Colonel Francis Hawthorn was declared deceased, and his wife Caroline would be relegated to a life of loneliness and dejection.

The war would have been over in somewhat less than a month.

Unfortunately, Francis had been formally confirmed to be dead.

There was nothing to be done.

After all, it was official.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE WRONG SIDE OF THE DOOR

AFTER SEVERAL RE-WRITES, Caroline was finally confident that the story was suitable for submission to her publisher; the wordsmith felt that she had refined the sketch of a narrative into a literary painting worthy of exhibition. After great deliberation, she had decided, although she had not even the faintest of ideas what the strange phrase meant, to permit the odd sentence she had typed at the end of the tale to remain.

A small part of her believed it would be disrespectful to remove it; another thought it important somehow that the words be publicly displayed. Perhaps, her readers would interpret them as a riddle, or believe that the line was some peculiar proverb. If they gave someone something to ponder, then that was so much the better.

Caroline had entitled her bit of prose 'The Queen, the Beast and the Fireplace.' Although there were too many coincidences, regarding the timing of her creative outburst and her obese tabbies sessions of slumber to easily ignore, she could not yet bring herself to believe that the story had originated with Fatticus. Caroline had cast the outlandish concept, relegating it with reason, into the back of her mind.

First of all, it was quite impossible for anyone to know the dreams of a cat, let alone recount them verbatim. It was not as if Caroline was some kind of Teletype that Fatticus could operate in his sleep; that idea was not only disquieting, but mildly insulting. No disrespect to her beloved pussycat intended, Caroline was firm in her resolve that there was absolutely no possibility that she could be the human puppet typist of a feline literary master.

If that outlandish theory was not valid, which it certainly was not, then Caroline must consider the notion that she could be suffering from some sort of mental disturbance. It was quite possible that her depression had finally

progressed to lunacy, and that she had begun to make the long, slow decent into madness.

The insanity, in this particular case, had apparently manifested in a condition by which her subconscious randomly seized control of her ability to type, and directed it to relate whimsical stories about animals that concluded with peculiar footnotes. It may be that her mind was striving to tell her something important about herself, a message told in metaphor deep in her psyche that was determined to make its way through any means necessary out into the open.

However, she did not accept that explanation either; if she was going to go mad, Caroline was quite convinced that she would do so in a much simpler, naked-on-the-floor-covered-with-her-own-faeces sort of fashion, and not by spontaneously self-ghost writing stories that would potentially elevate her out of her state of financial misery. It would certainly seem a counter-productive way to spiral into oblivion by earning an income, and placing food in the larder.

In fact, Caroline actually felt that her sanity had been better for the experience, and she was more relaxed than she had been in months.

For whatever reason, her literary dry spell had been broken; the rain showers of words were falling once more, and she could again ensure her cherubic little companion would continue to have an ample supply of tuna with which to fill, on a regular basis, his supper dish. At least, Caroline thought with a wry smile, if the truth of the matter were indeed the first considered possibility the little beggar would finally be earning his keep; it would not be her place to deny him of that opportunity.

It was late in the evening when the writer finally declared her work for the day completed; she then had a hot bath by candlelight, and enjoyed herself for the first time in many long weeks. Caroline drank a few glasses of merlot, chatted with Fatticus over nonsensical topics and then collapsed into her bed, soon falling past sleep into a state of rest that approached that of the clinically comatose.

Fatticus took his usual place on the foot of the bed, and enjoyed a much-welcomed session of peaceful slumber. The cat could sense the vast improvement in the demeanour of his guardian; she was much happier than she had been of late, and the favourable change pleased him very much. His tummy hoped that it would come to mean an increase in his portion sizes, and a return to more generous overall dietary allotments.

Regardless, he was thankful that all was well in the Hawthorn household and, if only for a night, in harmony once more.

He dreamt of endless fields of mice; then, the tabby awoke at first light, his appetite indicating, quite pointedly, that it urgently required satisfaction. He struggled to make it to his feet, and jumped down off the bed; his posterior, as his haunches were unable to provide sufficient stamina to keep his buttocks off of the ground, made a soft 'plop' on the polished floorboards. It would not be proper of him to complain; he had previously suffered landings that were unfortunately far more injurious.

He turned, and was ready to march off to the kitchen where he would administer his early morning wake up call when the mischievous ghost beckoned to him from the dark land underneath the bed, yet again mocking Fatticus with its display of the utter contempt it held for his superiority.

Frankly, the cat did not feel any need to waste his efforts on the spectre. Far more substantial prey had, over his life, come and went, vanished into his stomach in fact, that he had no need to demonstrate his obvious feline mastery by doing away with some insubstantial annoyance. He was a lion; he answered to no one. It made no sense to expend any effort on such trivial pursuits. He turned away, as he had done for hundreds of mornings before, choosing to ignore the impudent apparition. The famished feline was going to resume his course to the kitchen, and complete his mission; the ghost could engage in whatever amusements it desired alone while Fatticus consumed his desperately required meal.

After all, life only happened between breakfast and bedtime.

He had raised his paw in preparation of his intent to engage in forwardly movement, when the apparition, in one smooth, flawless motion, flew out from underneath the mattress, mere inches past Fatticus and his stunned, disbelieving face. It then reversed course, and slid quietly back into the dark land under the bed; the spectre's usual behaviour, as if the offending incident had never occurred, then resumed.

Fatticus would not; nay, he could not stand for that sort of ill-mannered conduct. This insult comprised a direct challenge to his supremacy, and was a blatant slight upon his pride. An affront such as this could simply not be tolerated. The mighty hunter turned menacingly, facing back towards the land of darkness underneath the bed, and put his woefully underpowered haunches into low gear, calling upon them to provide him with all the speed that they could muster.

The ginger-tabby then launched himself with the highest magnitude of propulsion that he had in his entire feline existence ever managed to produce at his kitten-hood nemesis, and the ghost simply turned away from his lunge, sailing at a neat right angle directly away from him. Poor Fatticus could only gaze after it in disappointment; his forward momentum was far too great for him to

even have a faint hope of a turning on the smooth hardwood surface. The helpless cat continued out of control on his current heading, toward several of the shadowy objects that stood in the way of his inescapable path of destruction.

There was a veritable cacophony of sounds as the items, having been unwillingly captured and taken along with the obese feline assault vehicle, emerged ahead of him upon his departure from the land underneath the bed and formed a rather disorganized pile against the wall; it was a mound that served to cushion the impact of the following, flabbergasted Fatticus. He struggled to return himself to an upright position, and then fought a brief battle to regain his senses; after his recovery, he turned his gaze back under the bed, at an opportune moment to witness his archenemy 'thumb its nose' once again in the cat's general direction.

"Charge!" he screamed in feline vernacular as he spurred on his hindquarters with the order of 'full speed ahead,' and made yet another pointless advance against the spirit. The feline battleship only proved effective at the rapid removal of unidentified objects from the shadowy terrain, casting them out into the sunlit world with all the noise and fury of a Texas tornado.

The human, Caroline, had been partially awoken by the first assault and, by the second, had unwillingly and quite unhappily been raised to a state of full awareness. The woman was obviously outraged by the intrusion upon her slumber, and infuriated by the wanton destruction that was currently taking place about her.

"FATTICUS!" she roared; her anger for the cat was hopelessly inconsolable, and her fury was certain to be brought down upon the hapless beast at the earliest available opportunity.

No longer his primary concern, the ghost drifted lazily around the newly renovated land underneath the bed whilst Fatticus strived to refocus his efforts on his desire to elude the enraged Caroline, who appeared to crave violent retribution for his impromptu re-landscaping of the shadowy world beneath her. It was all a big misunderstanding, a mistake, indeed, an accident; however, with no way for the cat to express these points to the substantially larger human, the only option currently available to him was to run as fast as he could, and keep his injuries to a minimum.

Although Fatticus was certain that Caroline would never do any real harm to him, there was no reason to provide her with a chance to unintentionally do so.

As such, Fatticus would strive, during this round of the interspecies Olympics, to place first in the avoid-the-human event. Caroline would have to admit that she was impressed by the uncharacteristic vigour and stamina that, in

his effort to escape her wrath, the grossly obese cat displayed. Her rage towards Fatticus whilst the two dashed about the flat quickly faded; as they both became exhausted, the pursuit soon degenerated into one of slow motion, until they were unable to carry the contest on any further.

Fatticus fell down on the floor in the kitchen; panting in defeat, he unwillingly presented himself to Caroline for her to render her judgment, and administer his penalty.

It was fortunate for him that it was all that the exhausted woman could do to keep herself propped upright in the doorway, while she gasped for air and tried to reach for words with which to convey her immeasurable scorn for her flatmate. She found herself sadly incapable of doing so; eventually she submitted, opting instead to turn away from the troublesome tabby, and slowly shuffle back to her bedroom where she would assess the damage and, the bothersome cosmos permitting, attempt to then obtain a little more sleep.

Fatticus, it appeared, had escaped his penance.

Unfortunately, she then undertook the one retribution that chastised Fatticus more than could any other reprimand; Caroline went back into the bedroom, and brusquely shut the door behind her.

There is nothing more maddening to a cat than a closed door, and even further still, one with a human behind it; this is especially so if it is their particular guardian who happens to remain on the opposite side. If there is any method with which one can drive a cat completely insane, it is this. Fatticus could not be entirely certain if Caroline had locked him out of the bedroom intentionally, if she had committed the vile act to exact revenge for his impromptu safari, or if the door had been closed accidentally; however, the effect that it had on him would have been, in either case, equally as traumatic.

The cat could hear her, behind the door, inspecting the displaced items and muttering expletives softly while returning her sullied belongings to their proper positions under the bed; that just made the situation even harder for the forlorn cat, who was cast away and cut off from his cherished companion. Fatticus wished that he could simply walk through the obstruction, but he could not; it was an impenetrable barrier that he was not capable to overcome.

In those few moments, Fatticus had become lonelier than he had ever been at any other occasion in his short existence, even more so than during his first encounter with the pantry inside the house in which he was born. The seclusion crashed into him like a tidal wave, and swept him off to a sea of despair; it was a place in which there was no hope, and only the dismal emptiness that such isolation brings. Soon, unable to bear it any longer, he began to express his

overwhelming anguish; he howled with such intensity that he had previously imagined impossible.

He howled, and the feline tenor, with an increasing sense of urgency each time he emitted the foul noise from his mouth, then proceeded to follow his own lead. Caroline had never heard in her entire life such an appalling racket; she was quickly convinced that Fatticus had managed to catch his tail in a cupboard door, caught his paw in a mousetrap or had set his whiskers on fire.

The human alighted from her bed without delay, and quickly threw open her bedroom door, ready to save Fatticus from whatever ghastly tragedy had befallen him.

Fatticus was overjoyed; his saviour had elected to do away with the obstruction that divided them, and rescue the cat from the emotional ocean that had threatened to drown him. Thankful for his reprieve, he promised that never again would he take up pursuit of the spectre underneath the bed; under no circumstances would he step foot in that forbidden shadow land, no matter what the situation and regardless of how the ghost may attempt to beguile him. He swore an oath on it, and his word was his law.

The evidently uninjured cat strolled over to Caroline and, in gratitude for her grant of clemency, rubbed himself up against the confused woman's legs. Then, the obese ginger tabby leapt up onto the foot of the bed, and settled down on top of the blankets with the desire to take a little catnap; all of this excitement had been quite exhausting, after all.

His guardian could only shake her head at the sheer audacity of her plump pussycat. She really had no idea why she chose to put up with his antics; perhaps she was fattening him up to be her four-legged Christmas goose. Bemused with her terrible thought, Caroline made her return under the covers, and set herself to sleep with a brief prayer that she would not be woken again by a similar commotion any time soon.

In fact, she hoped that such an occasion would never occur again.

However, the unfortunate truth was that Caroline did not have any real say in the matter. That, of course, was entirely up to the discretion of an overweight feline named Fatticus.

CHAPTER NINE

THE WITCH'S FAMILIAR

FATTICUS SLEPT and he dreamt.

Mischief, so named for her propensity to engage in exactly that, lounged lazily on her bed, tucked away in the corner of a run-down cottage, itself hid away in a dark, foreboding area of a vast medieval forest. The black cat was quite pleased with herself; her belly was full of tasty morsels, and a thunderstorm raged outside. It sang a chaotic lullaby by which she would come to sleep; her evening could not have been any better.

Lightning lit up the inside of the cottage as the witch, whose familiar Mischief was, toiled away feverishly upon her latest spell, an enchantment intended to cause the neighbouring village, one that had wronged the sorceress, great misery.

The cauldron boiled and bubbled on the hearth; the witch cackled wickedly as she assembled the necessary ingredients to create the vile potion, a concoction that would educate the inhabitants of the town on the follies of betraying her. It would provide a fitting retribution for the harm that they had conspired to inflict upon her and penance for the crime, by failing to yield to her simple demand for livestock, which they had committed.

A consequence of the lightning that blazed across the sky in the tempest that reigned outside, the resultant thunder crashed whilst the witch increased her efforts to a feverish pitch; as she employed her sorcery on the kettle, she screamed out her desires for revenge, and fermented the brew that was to be the mechanism of the naive villagers destruction.

The cat stretched and yawned; her efforts at slumber were curtailed by her mistress's shrill endeavours. An odd scent had chosen to waft past her gastronomically inclined nose, and she sniffed at it curiously.

The odour possessed an amazing appeal and Mischief, ordinarily quite a fussy feline, was quite certain she had never encountered anything like it; the smell was absolutely superb. There was no question; she must discover the source of such a divine aroma.

The witch, her malevolent masterpiece complete, poured the accursed liquid into several small vials; she then corked them, and collected them within her cape. As she took to her broom, she hooted wickedly, then opened the door and set off into the night; her task was to inflict mayhem upon the ill-fated, unwary souls she strove to punish for their acts against her.

The witch departed, having left alone, to her own devices, the cat.

By then, Mischief was thoroughly enraptured; the wonderful aroma that the cat promptly deduced was emanating from the cauldron had charmed her into submission. She made her way without delay to the kettle that held such appetizing magic, and worked to assess exactly how she would elevate herself to its lip.

The cottage was rather sparsely furnished; there was a rustic wooden table, some comparable chairs and little else. A pile of logs was stacked beside the hearth; however, it was not tall enough for the cat to reach the cauldron from its summit. She considered that, for her to take a sample of the astonishing brew, a combination of the firewood and the chairs would likely prove to be of sufficient height.

First, the witch's familiar would scamper up onto the lumber, and cause an intentional landslide; this had the effect of sending the carefully placed stack tumbling down into a chaotic heap to the front of the cauldron. Then, Mischief proceeded to scale the back of one of the chairs, and jump from it; the furniture was compelled to tip backwards, leaning upon the top of the firewood. Another ascent, made to the back of the remaining chair, prompted an additional leap; it was induced to tilt against the previous chair, and present a stepladder with which the cat could climb, and then only just stretch herself to the lip of the kettle.

She clambered up the impromptu ladder; while she balanced precariously, Mischief extended her feline body in a bid to attain her objective to its greatest possible length. She was rewarded for her efforts; to her delight, her nose poked barely over the edge of the immense pot. Mischief sniffed and she smelled; the cat happily savoured the sensational aroma of the concoction that she so urgently had craved to enjoy.

In an effort intended merely to sample a taste, the cat's tongue took a single lick of the soup; then, Mischief's mouth was overwhelmed with a symphony of flavour such as she could have never even vaguely imagined. The fluid was fantastic and it was fabulous; the feline could not resist partaking freely of it.

Her large, thick tongue eagerly lapped, as she stood above it, at the contents of the cauldron; Mischief no longer needed to stretch unsteadily but rather, her long donkey legs provided a firm footing. She gazed into her reflection, that of her big, brown eyes, her vastly oversized nose and the disquieting remainder of her revolting equine visage. The creature formerly known as a feline abruptly ceased her reckless imbibing, and mounted a serious attempt to grasp the repugnant reality of her present circumstances.

Mischief was a donkey; of that fact, there was indeed little doubt. Of course, it was ludicrous to think that she should have anticipated anything less; a witch after all had prepared the gourmet soup. It had been foolish to believe that no harm could come of its consumption. However, foresight of these details would have done nothing to diminish the irresistible aromas that the cursed liquid contained, nor quieted her overwhelming desire to experience its flavour.

The transmogrified beast, whilst pondering her new existence as a donkey, took a few mournful licks at the potion and concluded that such a life was simply not for her. There must be a method by which to reverse the calamity that Mischief had suffered; she was certain that the witch, upon her arrival, would deftly return her familiar to a rather more desirable feline form. Unfortunately, the possibility also existed that the foul sorceress, for trespassing into affairs of which the animal had no concern, would instead do away with her troublesome companion. Perhaps, and even worse, the witch could choose to sentence Mischief to hard labour; she would be condemned to live out in her current form the remainder of her miserable days.

The donkey, but only recently, evaluated all of her prospects, and found there to be a greater likelihood that one of the more unfavourable outcomes would soon transpire. Lest she face the wrath of the sorceress that was due to before long return to the cottage, she would quite plainly be required on her own to correct the discrepancy that she had caused.

Some vague recollections regarding the art of potions resulted from a rapid search of her memory. There was a possibility that if the brew were modified only slightly it would prompt a reversal of the less than desirable effect that the original had brought about. The donkey rummaged through

the witch's assortment of herbs, and dehydrated animal parts then stumbled across what ought to have been the perfect ingredient, cat's claws. In her mouth, she carried them; then, they were deposited into the cauldron. She allowed it simmer for a just little while before taking a timid sip of the newly adapted recipe.

Mischief waited anxiously and, when she began to return to her former size, was not disappointed. There was some mild alarm when her rapid decrease in dimensions failed to end at its expected point and, as her dramatic reduction continued, her concern equally rose. It progressed even further still until, when the dwindling finally came to a halt, the familiar found herself a great deal nearer than she was generally accustomed to the cobblestone floor.

She examined her tiny little paws, with their minute mousey claws; they were instinctively pressed into service to bathe her petite rodent muzzle. Toward this latest dilemma, Mischief squeaked her frustration; she strove to determine precisely how it could be that such a small creature, such as herself, would ever obtain any further opportunity to access the cauldron that was so very high above it.

The little mouse struggled with all of her tiny might to scale the table's leg; eventually, she succeeded in ascending to its wooden plateau. She hastily rummaged through the witch's supplies, and quickly located some dried mouse-tails; the logic of her choice of ingredient was that, if cat's claws turned her into a rodent, those ought to affect the opposite.

Her distance from the cauldron remained the only hindrance to her current aspirations. A crude catapult, consisting of a wooden spoon and a saltshaker, was fashioned; she then utilized it to launch the mouse-tails into the potion. Her first attempt came up a little bit short; she was a mite too long on her second try. Happily, the third time was the charm and, soon after the little mouse jumped upon the wooden spoon, the mouse-tails sailed merrily into the kettle to great celebration on the part of the relieved rodent.

With what little patience that remained to her, the mouse that had previously existed as a donkey which had formerly known life as a cat waited and, while its new ingredient stewed within the contents of the cauldron, worked to devise a practical method of reuniting herself with the pot.

Mischief had a theory, one whose hypothesis held that she could simply throw herself into the brew; once she had partaken of the new potion, a return to her feline form would be made, and she would then be in

a position to pull herself free from the cauldron. She considered employing the catapult in order to accomplish this; however, to launch her the relatively vast distance to the kettle, she would first need to find an object heavy enough to provide sufficient force.

A book presented a likely candidate, of magic or recipes, Mischief was not certain; she made her way atop it, and then leapt from the volume down on the depression of the spoon. The tome toppled, falling upon the handle of the cutlery; it sent the mouse hurtling through the air, across the chasm to the hearth up, and almost over the cauldron. At the hook, that the kettle's handle was set into, the rodent frantically grasped; finding success, she held on to it as best that she could, in order to stifle her forward momentum and prevent a fall into the fire beneath her.

The phantom odour of burnt mouse fur lingered in her imagination as she scurried up onto the hook, and looked down below upon the bubbling pot. No other options remained; her only choice was to willingly fall from her perch, dive into the soup and, with the greatest hope that she would be granted a return to her usual feline self rather than drown to death within the potion, drink deeply of it. The mouse decided that she would rather suffer that latter fate than remain a rodent and then, while making mad appeals for a miracle, promptly sank like a stone into the concoction, consuming as much of it as her miniature stomach would permit.

The racoon, her fur saturated with the potion, struggled to emerge from the cauldron; she then perched upon its lip, and waited for the turbulence in the soup to calm to such a point at which she could discern her reflection. It soon did so and, quite abruptly, Mischief found herself prompted into a position of defence; her back arched, and her mouth opened wide to make a parade of her fangs. However, her attempts to generate a hiss resulted in no sound being emitted whatsoever. The creature swore furiously, chirping phrases so foul that, could he comprehend him, even a seasoned military man would blush, until she was able to calm herself and try desperately to decipher what exactly had went amiss.

The introduction of cat claws had morphed a donkey into a mouse; an addition of mouse-tails had changed that rodent into her present form. Mischief's mind had the briefest of suggestions that it may be the addition of a racoon's whiskers might turn said animal into a feline; there did seem to be a strange sort of sense to her reasoning. She leapt down from the cauldron, and once again rearranged the furniture; this time, it was in order to permit her re-ascent to the table.

Another browse through the apothecary yielded the required additive, and the catapult was engaged to make delivery. A refashioning of, and a climb up the impromptu chair ladder soon led the raccoon to dip her nose into the potion, tentatively lapping at it whilst steadying herself for the worst.

The reflection in the cauldron was swiftly revealed to be that of the most hideous countenance it had ever been the revolting creature's misfortune to observe. Mischief was a bat, perhaps even the most unsightly of the species; this made it quite obvious that her attempts at finding any sort of logic in the relationships between the ingredients and their effects had dismally failed.

The bat began to panic; the witch would be back at any moment. Once she became aware of the trouble her familiar had caused, that cruellest of women was at that time certain to make a feast of whichever creature Mischief currently consisted of.

The quite batty, once-upon-a-cat flew across to the table haphazardly; she hysterically assembled a completely random assortment of ingredients, and then ferried the collection over to the cauldron. Mischief deposited them into the brew; while the revised potion reconstituted, she nervously waited. A liquid, of an odour and colour never previously encountered, resulted from her effort; she drank quickly of it. She wished to change as soon as she could, and she cared quite frankly not into what; a future lived as any other creature would be preferable to remaining as a bat any longer, regardless of however brief that opportunity may be.

Mischief lapsed into unconsciousness; when she awoke, she found herself with her limbs arranged in disarray, upon the cold, stone floor. The familiar sat herself upright, and then gasped at the hairless nudity that was exhibited before her eyes. She held her hands out in front of her face, and was amazed by their redness, marvelled over the slenderness of her fingers, and the hairlessness of her palms. Mischief felt her hair, and her skin; then, she rose to stand on her two legs, and moved to examine from this new perspective her surroundings.

The former cat was human; Mischief literally stood in awe of her tremendous stroke of good fortune.

Her mind overflowed with all of the opportunities that, as a human, she would have; she contemplated upon the endless range of experiences that existed for her to enjoy. Mischief could be a witch; like her mistress, she could take custody of her own familiar, and indulge them in ways that

she could be quite certain they would love to be pampered. Alternatively, she could leave the cottage, and go live in the village, as an ordinary woman, to have a husband and raise children; the range of possibilities appeared endless. The world was hers to explore, through all of the means that humanity had available to it; the benefits of membership in the world's dominant species were indeed quite extensive.

Then, much to the misfortune of the truly wretched creature, her mistress returned; the fantasizing maiden, unable to defend herself, was caught completely off-guard. To survey the scene, and deduce the events of her absence took, for the witch, all of a few seconds; she then crowed with an evil mirth, and cast a spell. It was an enchantment that would not only change poor Mischief back into a cat, but also make the familiar a feline forever; she would be unable to ever again take on a different form.

“Tails of mice and wings of bat,
Whiskers of raccoon and claws of cat,
All of these combined this night,
To make a grim and ghastly sight,
But, other things these do as well,
Such as forge your perfect Hell,
Hear my words! Listen to me!
This creature, a cat, you will always be!”

A worse punishment could not have been meted out to Mischief; the cat was to be perpetually haunted by the wondrous trappings of humanity that had been eternally denied her, and cursed with the knowledge of endless possibilities that she would never again be given the opportunity to experience. She then, as the cat that had left it a few hours before, skulked back into her corner, and curled her feline body up on her bed to sleep; she would endeavour to forget the terrible truth, that she would never be happy in this lifetime again.

In this particular case, curiosity killed the spirit of the cat.

Fatticus woke up, then; Caroline, her hair thoroughly dishevelled from a long night of rest, roused as well. The woman, as if possessed by a demon, then promptly leapt from her bed, and dashed from the room. As the human ran off, Fatticus gazed up drowsily after his guardian; he speculated for a brief moment on what the commotion regarded, then yawned.

The cat quickly came to the quite honest conclusion that he truthfully did not care.

PAGE 84 - FATTICUS FACES THE WOLF

Caroline, in her underwear, made a sprint for the typewriter; swiftly, she hunkered down like the proverbial monkey in front of it, and busily hammered out the tale that had so urgently called upon the writer to place its words upon paper.

When the narrative had reached a conclusion, she typed one nonsensical line more.

A grape rolls down hill like the cauliflower flies to the moon.

CHAPTER TEN

THE FIRST LINE

THE SITUATION WAS QUITE GRIM. Colonel Hawthorn huddled in the mud behind the rear tyre of the army lorry and, whilst he strove to develop a strategy by which he could rescue them both from their predicament, comforted one of his engineers, stricken with a bullet wound to his shoulder. The rest of the unit was dead, having been ambushed by a deviously positioned German machine gunner; only the harried officer and his lone subordinate remained.

In response to the unrelenting assault upon them, Francis fired his last round of ammunition; he then chose to implement a new tactic. As bullets continued to pierce the opposite side of the lorry, he remained silent, in the hope that their attacker would soon decide to move on and hunt new game. The entire affair was a complete disaster. Army Intelligence had previously informed him that there was no German activity there; the Colonel had been told that his units were free to survey this area, that the land had unquestionably been taken for the Allies and that there was nothing with which he need concern himself.

Those two words, 'Army Intelligence,' had proven themselves to be an oxymoron. The area had most certainly not been safe to survey, had definitely not been taken for the Allies and what was left of this particular engineering unit had a great deal to be concerned about. Conversely, Francis was doing his utmost to persuade his injured soldier that the man would not expire, and they were to make it out alive and well; it was all going to be just fine.

Frankly, Colonel Hawthorn was making his very best effort to convince them both of that.

His optimism was rewarded perhaps when the shooting abruptly ceased; either their assailant had decided to move on, or he had been forced to reload. Deciding that it would not be prudent to squander such an opportunity, the Colonel cautiously crawled over to the door of the lorry; he opened it as silently as possible, then raised his wounded man inside and quickly clambered over him.

Colonel Hawthorn's chosen course of action would involve great risk; however, it was likely that, were any left open to him, his further prospects would be few. In one unified motion, he engaged the ignition, pressed the accelerator to the floor and prayed for divine intervention. Francis would not be denied. The vehicle roared to life and lurched forward, the start of a wild, chaotic excursion over the jagged, bomb-defaced landscape.

Pools of mud and pockets of late winter snow, combined with the extensive damage to the tyres on one side of the lorry made it very difficult for Francis to maintain control; he had an impossible time fighting to keep the vehicle on a straight course, never mind turn it away from the battle zone. He had no idea where the lorry was heading; the officer cared only that he was moving away from the machine gunner that had killed his men, people that were his colleagues, his friends and his charges.

Francis felt personally accountable for what had occurred, despite the reality that there had been no way of knowing what lay in store for them and, regardless of what it would require of the Colonel in order to accomplish it, he was going to bring at least one of his men to safety.

The lorry shuddered savagely as it encountered a large obstruction; another tyre was destroyed, and Hawthorn lost what little control of the mechanical beast he had. It then took them on a terrifying expedition across the hellish terrain, until the motor went quiet; the vehicle eventually came to a stop at a completely unfamiliar location, one that the Colonel was deathly afraid would not be to their benefit. His door was soon opened from the outside; the rifles that were then trained on Francis informed him that his fears were quite justified. Their attempt at escape had come to an unfavourable finish.

They were captured.

His captors made short work of the wounded man; they killed him, without ceremony or discussion, directly to the front of his disbelieving officer. The Germans told Francis that they had no resources with which to treat injured enemy soldiers, and that it was kinder to, rather than force his man to die a slow lingering death, just 'finish him off.' Colonel Hawthorn thought that they were merely a pack of vicious cowards, and proceeded to notify them of his opinion. The man had a family, Francis argued; he assured them it was not 'kind' of them to deprive his children of their father, or his wife of her husband.

The Germans heard their prisoner out for a brief moment, ruminated upon his protestations and then, with the butt of a rifle, silenced the Colonel's concerns.

His interrogation seemed as if it would last forever. The Germans asked him the same questions repeatedly; they would pose their queries when he was

tired, present them again when he was hungry, or when he had just awoken, and while he was eating whatever little food they provided him. Francis did not offer a great deal in reply; the simple truth was that he did not have any substantive answers to give them. He could tell his interrogators all they would like to know about engineering roads or building bridges but, as a matter of propriety, he was not liable to advise the Germans of the locations where his army planned to construct those.

In fact, the Colonel informed them he did feel quite positive that just for this eventuality, his commanders had actually sent his units to survey roads that would never be built; thusly, any information they successfully tortured out of him was likely to be of no use. His captors must have grown weary of his responses, for they ceased to interview him and appeared to then disregard Francis.

Aside from a meagre meal now and again he spent his days relegated to his unfurnished cell; Francis reminisced about his true love Caroline, and wished that he was home in England with her instead of where he was, slowly rotting away.

One day his bare subsistence failed to arrive. He shouted down the narrow corridor outside of his tiny cell, but there was no response to his calls; no activity could be heard. There was no sustenance the next day either, nor the day that followed. Francis continued to make his pleas; regardless, there was no reply and no movement was observed. There was naught but an eerie silence.

He started to worry, and fret that the installation in which he was held had been abandoned; the Colonel agonized over the possibility that the war had ended, and he was forgotten. No one would ever come for him.

A great deal of time passed while by the day Colonel Hawthorn grew weaker; as his memory started to fade, he progressively lost his hope. A ravenous hunger burned deep within his stomach; he felt it gnawing away at his very soul. He began to go mad; he would prattle at himself regarding gibberish subjects.

It was as if his body had chosen to sustain itself by eating away at his mind.

Every so often, Francis would cry out for Caroline; he would then forget who she was, and promptly remember again. Tears would flow from his eyes while he thought of just how much he missed her and, no matter what the cost, how much he longed to be with her once more.

Eventually, the door opened, and a few German soldiers removed him from his cell. Their prisoner was unable to walk, so they carried him to the interrogation room where a man awaited his presence. He was not a military

man, nor a soldier, but a small, bespectacled fellow; he would then ask Francis all manner of peculiar questions. The strange man wished for the Colonel to tell him what number he was thinking of, or what picture was on the hidden face of a card. When Francis was correct, the little man would reward him with a small quantity of food, which his prisoner ate eagerly and appreciatively. An hour or two of these proceedings passed; then, the man motioned for the soldiers to return the prisoner to his cell.

Twenty-four and then forty-eight hours passed. Colonel Hawthorn was starving yet again; he began to become concerned that he had committed some sort of wrong, although he was uncertain as to what his offence could have conceivably been. He had become rather despondent by the time that, to his immense relief, the soldiers revisited his cell; he was taken to the interrogation room where the small man, a scientist Francis was quite confident, asked him the curious questions once more. This round, Francis answered correctly more often and in exchange was given a greater quantity of food; it was a reprieve for which he was very thankful.

That his bouts with starvation were intentional soon became obvious. Three more days passed and, just as the Colonel had approached the point of no return, the soldiers carried him away for the scientist to ask Francis another bank of questions; the accuracy of the prisoner had improved, and he was fed a little more than previously. Francis Hawthorn, as his supply of food steadily increased, grew a tad stronger each round; soon, he was again able to think for himself. He worked to determine the rationale behind what was certain to be some dastardly scheme.

Despite his efforts, Francis could find neither rhyme nor reason in it, evil or otherwise; he concluded that as long as it served to keep him alive it would mean no harm to play the Germans' odd game.

Francis had become convinced that there could not possibly be any further surprises, until he was proven wrong; the soldiers opened his cell door and, rather than remove him for his next session, tossed in a cat, a rather ordinary garden-variety pussycat. It was a ginger-tabby; from what Francis could discern through distant observation, a female. The visibly frightened animal took up residence in the opposite corner of his prison, sat and stared at him with her striking blue eyes, likely evaluating his potential as a threat. Possibly, the Colonel considered, the cat was afraid that he might try to eat her.

The man did look rather gaunt, after all.

The cat did fear the human for indeed just that reason. The tabby arched her back and hissed at Francis; it formed a rousing punctuation at the end of an unspoken statement that the man would do his best to give her a wide berth. He attempted to reassure the creature that he meant her no such harm and, after a

few hours had passed the animal would, but only just slightly let down her guard. She sat in watch over the human, her unease indicated by the continuous agitated sweeping across the cement floor of her tail; her gaze never strayed away from her potential predator.

Francis tried to pay no attention to his feline cellmate, and find some sleep; however, he only had nightmares in which he relived his capture where the Germans had so casually shot his man and, as if his existence held no meaning done away with his life. The Colonel hated them for it; he reviled them more intensely than he could ever have thought possible. Francis wished to punish each and every German soldier for their transgressions; he would have them atone for the men that they killed, and the families they had destroyed.

Hawthorn awoke to find that the mysterious cat was still undertaking her surveillance of him; the feline obviously remained undecided as to the nature of the human with which she had been interned.

“What are you in for?” the Colonel said, as the cat maintained her never-ending stare, in jest; his reluctant companion provided no response to the man’s pitiable effort at humour. Despite his best efforts, Francis could make absolutely no sense of the cat’s presence there. “What, in blazes, would they lock up a cat for?” he asked himself, “Are they trying to see if I would eat the poor creature?”

It was an argument that led to more questions than answers.

As the day went by, the cat would relax further; the perceived likelihood that the human would attack her diminished until she was finally comfortable enough to take a little cat nap. Francis was pleased to see that she was no longer staring at him; he was starting to find that to be just a little unnerving. A few hours passed, and then the soldiers returned. The man was escorted to the interrogation room; the cat was taken away, to somewhere unknown. He received the customary questions, and his answers netted the usual rations, perhaps a little more. Then, the soldiers took Francis back to his cell, where the cat was waiting.

The Colonel had pocketed one of his morsels; he offered it to his compulsory cohort. Tossing it halfway between them, it landed in the centre of the concrete floor. She sniffed in the air at its scent, and the cat quickly recognized the scrap as something edible. Tentatively, ever so slowly, she crept towards the offering. The feline was about halfway to the small piece of meat when something unseen to Francis startled the cat; she quickly reversed course, back into her corner where she remained for a few tense minutes. Gradually, she struck out again.

Back and forth, the cat went; two or three more attempts were made before she finally executed a daring manoeuvre. In a flash of ginger, she scurried

to the middle of the room, collected her prize and beat a hasty retreat to the corner; she then scrutinized her gift thoroughly.

Judging it to be fit for consumption, the cat devoured the treat. She then settled down for further slumber, but not before furnishing her companion with a stern look of warning. When she roused, it was not only very dark, but also quite cold; the tabby, motivated by necessity elected to take her chances with the warm-blooded, sleeping human. The cat crept her way warily over to the man, huddled for warmth next to him and returned to her dreams.

Francis chose to name the cat Cleopawtra; it was an awful pun he knew, but he thought that it was clever, and that was all that mattered. He and Cleo, over the subsequent weeks became quite close; he would never fail to bring her a treat from his sessions, and she would cosy up next to him, as they slept in the spring air on the cold concrete. He would pet her, and she purred with greater enthusiasm every passing day in reply. Cleo soon learned to trust the human implicitly. She felt safe in his presence, found comfort in his touch and pleasure in his company.

Thereafter, the sessions took a bizarre, outlandish turn. Rather than asking Francis their typical questions, they demanded that the man convey what the cat, the one he had named Cleopawtra, was thinking or, more specifically what the creature was presently seeing. Francis was certain that his captors had gone completely mad; of how to accomplish the lunacy the scientists wanted of him he had absolutely no idea. The Colonel was quite positive that what they were requesting was an absolute impossibility. He flatly refused; further, he laughed at his captors and in return, they did not offer him any additional provisions.

They quite literally sent Francis back to his cell without any supper.

Cleopawtra was discontented with the lack of her daily morsel; however, she forgave Francis for his indiscretion, and strove to console the unfortunate man in his hunger. Two days went by; then, the Colonel was summoned to the interrogation room, where the directive that he describe what the cat currently saw was repeated. It was a request that he once again rejected. Francis huddled, unfed for five days with the cat in the corner of his cell; in his hunger-stricken insanity, his mind began to entertain the faint possibility that he truly was capable of perceiving what the animal saw. If he could only do so, it would enable the prisoner to tell his utterly mad jailers what they wished to hear; they would then grant him at least the tiniest crumb of food with which to stave off his impending starvation.

The cat sat on his lap and, with grave concern, studied the human while Francis, attempting to obtain even the briefest glimpse of what Cleopawtra currently observed concentrated as intensely as his famished psyche would allow.

Sadly, his efforts to visualize what she saw met with no immediate success. The Colonel soon grew to be tremendously frustrated; he shouted at the poor cat as if it was her failing and not his, and she fled in terror to the other corner of the tiny room. Defeated, the dejected man curled up in the foetal position on the cold, concrete floor and, while his hunger blazed like a fire in his stomach, cried himself to sleep.

Francis dreamt the strangest dreams; he had fantasies in which he was a kitten, imagery where he watched the abductions of his brothers and sisters, and was finally himself taken away from his mother. They were of course fabrications of an imagination that due to starvation had lost all logic. The more likely explanation was that the Colonel had nearly lost his mind; in a desperate attempt to keep sane, he was motivated to persuade himself that he had telepathically communicated with the cat and as a result, the officer would soon be fed. Truthfully, he could not envision the cat's memories; it was all just whimsy borne out of a necessity to maintain his spirits.

The Colonel awoke, but his eyes remained closed while the starved prisoner struggled to use what little intellect he had left to regain some basic common sense. Abruptly, he became aware of another man who was also lying, facing away from Francis, in the opposite corner of the cell on the concrete floor. Colonel Hawthorn jumped to his feet, prepared to confront this unexpected interloper into his exceedingly humble abode; the mystery gentleman did the same, raising himself from the ground at the same precise moment as the Colonel. Curiously, although he matched all of Francis's movements exactly, his back remained turned.

It soon dawned upon the Colonel that his eyes were actually still shut and, when he finally opened them, he became quite confused for the walls of the cell were right in front of him, yet he was positive that he could observe a man as clear as day standing on the other side of the room.

He spun himself around suddenly and in the next instant, he saw Cleo lying in the opposite corner staring up at him inquisitively, whilst also viewing his doppelganger gaping at him from across the room. A shocked expression was on his face, and his mouth hung open in total astonishment. This was all rather too much for his disturbed and somewhat demented mind to process; he collapsed, his consciousness electing to switch itself off as his intellect was unable to reconcile this misshapen reality that had just presented itself.

His mind was a jumble; it not only contained his memories, but Cleo's recollections as well. Francis' perturbed brain ultimately decided to resign its efforts to apply logic to the new state of affairs, and blithely accepted the notion that it really could see what the feline saw. When he came around, the guards entered and dragged him away again, only this time he would present the

scientist with the responses that the small man desired; the German gave the ravenous prisoner some urgently needed rations, and all parties were quite satisfied.

The subject of the successful experiment returned with several tasty morsels for Cleopawtra; she was very happy with Francis, and showered him with a great deal of affection. Francis had seen shapes, images of objects that had presumably been viewed by the cat; he had perceived a ball, a box, a kite and so forth. The next session, the figures became more complex; he saw a drawing of a sheep in mid-jump over a fence, and an outline of a division of nine cockroaches in formation. Francis was taught to string these representations into sentences; however, the phrases appeared to make little sense. They composed odd statements, such as 'the purple baboon throws oranges over the Christmas tree.'

They may have not been terribly coherent, but that he was able to relate them pleased the scientist immensely and Francis was well rewarded with a swiftly escalating quantity of food. Francis and Cleopawtra, as the complexity of the exercises increased, became quite well fed; he was instructed on how to relay images to Cleo and was successful, or at least he assumed so since they persisted to compensate him for his efforts.

The Colonel soon began to comprehend the gist regarding the experimentation of which he had been an unwilling participant. Put simply enough the cat was a wireless. Francis was being trained to use Cleopawtra to transmit messages in pictograms to and from some remote source; this was presumably another human, and their particular cat. The process was ingenious. It would be completely undetectable, and provide the perfect method to relay, without any risk of interception, military orders and intelligence information.

The Germans were not insane; they were diabolical. The Allies had no defence against such a powerful weapon.

When he came to the awful realization that it was quite likely his homeland would shortly be damned, his heart sank. Francis refused to cooperate with his captors any further; it was a matter of principle and loyalty. The pair began to starve once more for likely the final time. There was simply no way in Hades that a Colonel in the British Army would contribute to his own country's destruction; the man and the cat would both perish from starvation, but the alternative was unthinkable. He apologized to Cleopawtra; the Colonel hoped to convey to her that they would be making a noble sacrifice, and that they were helping to save the world from German conquest.

Then, they quietly waited for Death to come and escort them to a gentler place.

Rather than Death, the British arrived; their soldiers forcibly entered their cell, then carried the Colonel and, at the behest of the generally incoherent man, the feline Cleopawtra to safety within a new facility with vastly superior amenities. The Army hospital housed, in Francis' opinion, the world's most comfortable bed, delicious food and sparkling clean water.

Francis would have never considered military hospitality to be heavenly before his detainment; nevertheless, it had seemed then as if there could be no better.

The Colonel slowly recovered with his faithful companion Cleopawtra by his side; the army hierarchy chose not to disturb Francis until he was on his feet again. The conflict was over, the armistice had been signed and the now-liberated prisoner of war was making plans to return home, to see his beautiful wife Caroline and begin to enjoy the future that they had discussed so many months before. Francis Hawthorn pledged to take in the world at its fullest, and never take any of it for granted ever again.

The officer would eventually be debriefed; the interviews were scheduled to go on for several days. He recalled all that he could remember of the secret German program, about his training and its relationship to the ginger-tabby with which he had been rescued. Colonel Hawthorn was convinced that his comrades would find his accounts unbelievable, and he failed to see any reason why they should; it really was all rather implausible. It was likely that the Army would attribute his recollections to prisoner dementia, and dismiss the deranged soldier; he would then be sent home, with his cat of course.

When one morning, towards the conclusion of his debriefing, Brigadier-now-Major General Lewis Carlton, his old military school headmaster came to visit him at the hospital, Colonel Hawthorn was taken aback. The two men talked cordially for a while out on the lawn; Francis brought the Major General up to date on the particulars of his military career, and Carlton seemed quite satisfied with his pupil's outcome. Hawthorn would receive a medal, the Major General then informed him, for his bravery in the effort to rescue his colleague. Francis felt honoured.

After the small talk had concluded, he posed to Carlton the single most important question on his mind, the small detail of when he would be permitted to return home to his wife Caroline.

Major General Carlton's expression instantly changed from that of jovial to sombre; perhaps it was even one of sadness as he notified his devastated subordinate that the British had made the decision to take control of the project. All of the scientists and, much to Colonel Hawthorn's great dismay, its subjects were all top secret 'property' of the British government. The General advised Francis that a letter, certifying his death, had been delivered to his wife along

with his 'posthumously' awarded medal; all of his records had been subsequently edited to list him as deceased.

For all intents and purposes, Colonel Francis Hawthorn no longer existed. The nameless man that remained alive was a permanent servant of the King of England.

"But, cheer up old chap," the general said with feigned optimism, "you will be part of the new first line of defence for your country. It will be a very important post; you know, you ought to be proud."

Francis refused to accept any of it. "Now see here," he stammered, "I protest! You could not possibly do such a thing to us! We are in love!" The bewildered Hawthorn became very irate; he took to his feet with the intention of confronting the Major General and further arguing his position.

The witnesses to the scene may have been correct in what they saw. Hawthorn may have indeed raised a fist towards the elderly officer; his attempts at later recollection were vague.

Regardless, the butt of a rifle silenced his complaints yet again; he woke up locked in a cell alone, a prisoner once more.

"The scientists say this cat needs to stay with you," the English guard, in a cockney accent said as he tossed Cleopawtra carelessly into the cell with the hapless former person. Francis smiled sadly for he was relieved to see the cat, but the vanquished officer was not exactly in the best mood for company.

Despite this, the ginger tabby carefully made her way over to her companion and curled up on his lap.

She purred. There was no need for Francis to touch her; her affection for him required no reciprocation. The hypnotic sound provided a small comfort to the man for whom there appeared to be no hope, a soldier on whom his country had chosen to turn its back and use him for its own untold ends.

At least they returned his violin.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE TEA PARTY

WHEN FATTICUS WAS LEFT ALONE for any period of time, he would howl 'like the Dickens.' This serenade was not generally well reviewed by those neighbours forced to provide an impromptu audience for the lonely cat's musings. Although both the volume and the stamina that the cat demonstrated were quite impressive, the tonal quality of the performance left a great deal to be desired; it grew tiresome rather quickly.

It was soon decreed at the behest of the other tenants that should Caroline prefer to remain and continue to accommodate Fatticus, she would need to find a resolution to the outbursts produced by the aspiring feline virtuoso. Unfortunately, it was promptly discovered that no room in the flat could contain the sheer quantity of clamour generated by the living air raid siren. Neither could Caroline take Fatticus about with her on her errands; she did not own a motorcar, and it was impossibly impractical to cart the overweight feline around on foot.

Furthermore, all attempts at leash training had failed miserably. The cat would simply fall on his back like a sack of potatoes, exploit his vast centre of gravity and frustrate any efforts to move him. Fatticus found the idea of being led around like common livestock to be rather insulting; there would be no circumstances under which he would permit himself to be subjected to such demeaning treatment. In addition, the world outside frightened the sheltered cat a great deal; as such, he had absolutely no desire to ever leave his perch and risk the veritable jungle that existed at the level of the street below.

The outdoors were quite literally too far beneath him to waste his valuable time. He even refused to behave himself on the ground level when left in the grocery with the venerable Mister Kao.

The thought occurred to hire a nanny, who could watch over the feline malcontent while Caroline was away from her residence. Regrettably, despite numerous enquiries on the part of the exasperated author she was not taken

seriously by anyone she contacted and in result no candidates had been forthcoming. Eventually she realized that she could simply hire a housekeeper to come in and tidy the flat for one day of the week; Fatticus would not be alone, he would not howl, and Caroline would then be free to manage her affairs.

As a consequence, the apartment would also be cleaned without any effort on her part; it was a very attractive solution.

It appeared to be a rather straightforward method of solving the problem; however, nothing was ever simple when it came to matters related to Fatticus. To find a housekeeper willing to tolerate the misbehaving cat proved to be an exercise of equal difficulty to that of acquiring a nursemaid for a difficult two year-old. The women refused to speak of what crimes the feline had committed, and curtly declined any offer to return; their eyes were filled with nothing but spite for the ginger-haired devil. The troublemaking tabby had equally appeared to be quite pleased with his accomplishments.

As the months passed, Caroline grew increasingly alarmed that she would soon exhaust the supply of available candidates. Every week, a fresh housekeeper would arrive, then depart in disgust and vow never to return; that was the status quo, at least up until the day that Missus Tottenham made her introduction. Rather than, the way the others had done, casually disregarding Caroline's customary forewarning as that of a neurotic widow making too much of her cat, she instead considered the author's words rather gravely, taking notice regarding the strong likelihood for unpleasant deeds instigated by the temperamental animal.

The tall, thickset woman towered over Fatticus; in as menacing a voice as the soft-spoken Englishwoman could muster, she informed him in no uncertain terms that she would not tolerate antics of any sort from the itinerant creature and, if he knew what was best for him, he would be mindful to keep his mischief to a minimum. Fatticus chose to reserve judgment on any decision he might make on the subject, and Caroline tentatively left the two alone to perform her requisite tasks. The author had great hopes and prayers invested in Missus Tottenham's cat-tending abilities.

Caroline was pleasantly surprised upon her return; Missus Tottenham was happy, and cheerful while Fatticus appeared contented, and satisfied. The author, overjoyed with the success had been greatly tempted to inquire of the housekeeper regarding her secret; however, as the woman gave the impression that any attempt to do so would be imprudent, Caroline thought it wise not to chance jeopardizing the blessed arrangement with her questioning. Therefore, the writer, with no further inquiry, gratefully compensated the housekeeper; the miracle worker returned the following week to render the same outstanding service.

In proud possession of her recently crafted feline narratives, Caroline was to use the following Housekeeping Day to meet with her publisher and discuss potential markets for the pussycat related tales. She had padded the stories out to an appropriate length, and then edited them until they were suitably refined. The writer felt that she had, whilst making them fit for consumer publication, adequately retained the spirit of the anecdotes, but was uncertain as to how any profit could be obtained from their use.

She had always been solely and exclusively an author of serious romance novels; never a fanciful children's short-story writer. Caroline was not optimistic regarding her publisher's prospective willingness to adapt to this surprising twist in her literary career. In any case, the unsettling reality was that the two stories were all Caroline had to offer; if her editor were to refuse to accommodate her, she would be forced to begin the long, gruelling process of courting a new printing house, one that would have an interest in her revised style of writing.

That course of action would likely take far longer than the time or the money that Fatticus and his guardian had remaining to them.

The day dawned, and Fatticus soon became rather animated. The cat always appeared to be quite aware of Missus Tottenham's impending visits; his anticipation on the mornings that the housekeeper was scheduled to come around was rather noticeable. Caroline had as yet failed to deduce the magic that the housekeeper had performed upon her cat to make him perk up so in response to her imminent arrival; nevertheless, she had vowed to one day discover their secret and learn just precisely what nefarious undertakings that the two took part in whilst she was away.

However, that day was not going to provide those answers.

A chime sounded and Fatticus, his own little bell jingling wildly, dashed to the entrance hall. His behaviour was more like that of a dog than a cat as the creature was so very eager to welcome the person waiting on the other side. Confirmation that the desired individual was present came when, after a seemingly vast sum of time passed in which Fatticus was quite certain even the slowest of snails could have managed the entire length of the flat, Caroline finally opened the door.

Like a child running merrily to his favourite grandmother, Fatticus scampered gaily with all the youthfulness of a kitten over to the housekeeper; he joyfully rubbed himself up against her legs in a celebration of affection that quite frankly made Caroline terribly jealous.

She had no recourse for her envy; despite her feelings, this was how things simply must be. She greeted the towering Missus Tottenham; they exchanged their usual pleasantries and then, the much shorter woman dressed

herself, in her coat, gloves and driving cap. They were peculiar choices since she never drove, but it was her fashion. Arming herself with her manuscripts the author, whilst bidding adieu to a somewhat distracted Fatticus, then made her way out the door. The countdown had begun; Caroline would waste little time, as she had a great deal to accomplish in the few hours she had allotted.

Missus Tottenham turned as the front door of the flat closed behind Caroline, and smiled at Fatticus. "I suppose we had better see to you first," the housekeeper stated playfully; she wandered further into the apartment with one very excited feline close behind.

The short stroll to the local rail station was uneventful, and Caroline used the time to ponder the great mysteries enclosed in the oddly cordial relationship between Fatticus and Missus Tottenham. She entertained the suggestion that in the effort to pacify the beast narcotics might be employed; however, when Caroline had previously fed catnip to Fatticus he had merely, with his usual gluttony, consumed it and then petitioned her for more. No intoxication had been observed on the part of the gigantism-inflicted feline; she was quite certain that was not her answer.

Perhaps, the housekeeper fed Fatticus something the cat found extraordinarily appetizing, treats such as salmon or liver; on the other hand, the woman never appeared to have anything of the sort. Besides, the creature did not typically allow any food to linger in his mouth long enough for him to savour it. Her speculations came to no conclusions and, while Caroline made her journey into the city, served only to pass the time.

Since Caroline had spontaneously recounted the tale of the witch's familiar, there had been no further narratives; she had however produced several more of the strange nonsensical sentences such as 'the tuba swims with the tuna,' or 'four sunrises had a picnic with the zebra.' She had been unable to find any meaning in them, but yet the urgent compulsions the writer had to type the phrases continued. She worried the incidents were a symptom of her continuing mental deterioration; although they could also indicate an increasing connection to Fatticus, that latter possibility was one that she still staunchly refused to seriously consider.

Even if she had, it would fail to explain why, were he truly the source of the messages, Fatticus would imagine that fish and brass instruments frolicked freely with each other. The issue was really one of little consequence as the only concern of import was her imminent financial ruin; it was a condition that she was presently labouring to correct. She had only enough money remaining to transport her to her destinations and compensate Missus Tottenham, nothing more; the metaphorical kitty was completely empty, and the literal one would soon be as well. Caroline Hawthorn implored whichever deity truly responsible

for the universe to grant her a reprieve, and prayed that the day would bring a straightforward purchase of her writings.

Meanwhile, Fatticus and Missus Tottenham were having a tea party. The cat sported the rather attractive gown and bonnet that had been tailored especially for him; they featured shades of baby blue, white lace and embroidered flowers. The two sat on the rug centred in the sitting room, separated by an impromptu table that the housekeeper had constructed from empty milk crates and discarded shoeboxes; she had adorned it with an old towel for a makeshift tablecloth.

While the woman regaled the costumed kitty with stories about her children, her husband and her cat they sipped on Earl Grey tea with a little sugar, and a spot of Mister Kao's daily delivery of cream or, in the case of the frocked feline, cream and no sugar with a spot of tea. Her companion listened intently whilst politely scooping pieces of kibble from a small bowl on to the table; he then dragged them to his front where he would snack upon them.

This was their secret. The housekeeper would read to him children's tales of little mice, and the adventures of other delicacies; she would play games, both plain and intricate with Fatticus until the cat was drowsy, content and prepared for a rest. Missus Tottenham would then tuck Fatticus into a bed that she had fashioned out of Caroline's pillows, and sing lullabies to the happy feline until he fell fast asleep and had gone away to a land of fairy tales and fantasy. Free to commence her work, the housekeeper would then set herself upon her chores without the interruptions or distractions typically manufactured by her audacious, furry friend.

The trick had been rather easy to figure out; Fatticus was after all merely another child.

Missus Tottenham's offspring had grown to adulthood and 'left the nest;' in their place, she had several fur-bearing 'children' of her own. She had discovered after great trial and error that if you regarded the cats as if they were toddlers, they would tend to respond as human children; those included overweight ginger-tabbies with an immense sense of grandeur. The woman had found in Fatticus both great personality and intelligence; this made for a great deal of amusement for both her and the cat. She was continually astonished by just how sophisticated the cat's interactions could be, and he was elated with the attention that the housekeeper would grant him as a result.

The previous pussycat-sitters had made the crucial error of ignoring him; they would usher him away or even become cross when he had merely wished to be friendly. Missus Tottenham had been refreshingly different. Fatticus had become quite attached to his weekly playmate, not to such a point as to give him cause to stray from Caroline; their arrangement was mutually agreeable.

However, he did particularly enjoy the company of the housekeeper's visits, and awaited them with great enthusiasm. The cat would have been a very forlorn creature indeed should the visits have been forced to end; Missus Tottenham would certainly have felt quite similar.

The housekeeper cleaned while Fatticus dreamt; that day, he had a gloomy vision of a distressed feline, a ginger tabby like himself who was imprisoned in a cell with her human companion, a captured soldier. It appeared as if all hope had been thoroughly lost, and that the pair faced a rather unhappy future; Fatticus was quite concerned for them, and he contemplated on how they were to be free of their current predicament. He woke up briefly and when he returned to sleep, they had vanished, disappeared into the mist of his subconscious mind.

In the meantime, Caroline sat with rigid posture in the stately, historic offices of her publisher, J.T. Fezzywig and Company whilst nervously awaiting her editor, an older gentleman known to her only as Ted, to finish his perusal of the narratives that she had presented, and then pass his judgment upon them. The half bald man would only occasionally break the unbearable silence by emitting bursts of erratic laughter intermixed with a sporadic grumble; his bushy eyebrows bounced like hysterical caterpillars between those two extremes of emotion. When he was complete, and raised his eyes from her pages, no expression could be found to betray his assessment on his face; this provided no respite for the tense author.

"I would have to say," he finally said cautiously, "that these are rather good." He disturbed the agonizing quiet and raised Caroline's spirits, but only briefly. "However," he followed, tersely, "they are certainly no romance novel." As she speculated upon the apparent imminent rejection of her submissions, her heart sank; she would be forced to find other avenues in order to pay the rent, and feed her cat.

Mister Ted then proceeded to launch into a harsh and grating diatribe about how marvellous and engaging Caroline's numerous romance novels had been. He lamented over how it was an absolute travesty that she was evidently incapable of producing another such manuscript, how saddened he was that he would apparently not be editing any more of her passionate epics and how the publisher would mourn its failure to profit from those same nonexistent volumes.

"Fortunately for you," he continued, with no variation witnessed upon his disgruntled visage, "the company launched a children's periodical a few months ago, and it is in desperate need of content. So," he paused, leaving Caroline hanging off the break in proceedings as if awaiting a verdict regarding her possible execution, "we will agree to purchase these works from you." The

acquitted woman released an enormous sigh of relief. Fatticus would continue to be fed for a little while longer; so would she.

The elated author thanked her editor profusely, and heaped her praise upon the universe, specifically whoever or whatever had participated in the successes of the day.

“If you come up with any more of these,” Ted stated, as he brought their business to a conclusion, “bring them to me, and I will have a look at them. But,” he appended haughtily, “I want to make it quite clear that I would rather be presented with a romance novel.”

Caroline assured him that she would continue in her attempts, even though she honestly did not care what the man preferred; the sale of the stories had made her feel confident again and, if she would be paid for it, the author would be quite happy to make a new career writing about cats. The publisher issued her a cheque straight away; Caroline, lest her cat’s stomach suffer dearly, had made it a condition of sale that she would receive payment that day.

Afterwards, she undertook the jubilant journey to the bank where she made a much-needed deposit, with great hope that in the near future there would be many more such visits.

Missus Tottenham, upon Caroline’s return, had been quite delighted to observe a happier expression on her employer’s face, concerned by the sense of desperation that the housekeeper had felt from the woman earlier in the day. Fatticus by that time had roused from his nap; all vestiges of their afternoon together had been carefully squirreled away for another day.

He too was happy to see his guardian in better spirits; Fatticus hoped that this meant some security for his continued culinary experiences. He also generally preferred his human to be on the lighter side of the emotional spectrum; it was better for all concerned. Fatticus was not merely an unfeeling stomach on legs, after all.

That evening held much celebration; the author and her cat toasted the future with her merlot and his milk, one that was to apparently be financed by feline tales of mischief and make-believe. Regardless of Fatticus’s true role in all of it, they would have a partnership together; all she desired was for him to remain with her, to keep her company and hear her secrets. His love was that all she needed, and all he demanded in return was to have hers.

Oh, and of course Fatticus required kibble.

One could never forget that.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A LIFE OF INDENTURED SERVITUDE

“WHAT IF SACRIFICING THE LIFE of one man would allow you to save the lives of one hundred others. Would it be easier if it were one thousand or perhaps one hundred thousand? If taking the life of the one man could prevent a war that could cost millions of innocent lives, would you ethically be able to execute him? Would you do what was necessary to preserve the lives of your friends, of your family and of society at large?”

These were the questions his inquisitors posed repetitively to the imprisoned Francis Hawthorn; the queries were intended to encourage the insubordinate soldier to appreciate their position. That stance was the attitude of the English military, of the British government and of the Crown himself. Regrettably, their prisoner was having none of it; the seething rage of the former Colonel had made the man quite averse to entertaining their reason.

Francis Hawthorn had been abandoned; there was absolutely no hope that anyone would ever see to his rescue, and that fact made him a very angry fellow indeed. The love of his life, Caroline thought he was dead, slain on the battlefield and buried namelessly in some French cemetery. She had been served a miserable, dirty lie, garnished with a terse military apology and sweetened with a small pension on which she would live out the rest of her days, without him by her side to hold, comfort or watch over her.

Were he truly dead, it would have been terrible enough; however, he was merely a prisoner, denied his freedom by his own treacherous government. Francis had become an unwilling participant in an insane German-come-British project that remained as fantastic to him as it did the first time he saw himself through Cleopawtra's feline eyes. His only desire was to return to London and see Caroline again, hold his wife close to his chest and assure her that it had been all been a horrible mistake, a gross misunderstanding. Sadly, it was a wish that he would not be granted. There had been no error committed; the decision to detain him was one well considered.

The British had seen great merit in the former German endeavour and, following the Colonel's own rather convincing testimony, had chosen to requisition the project for its own intelligence purposes. Choosing not to inform any of their wartime allies of the remarkable discovery, they absconded with all of it, the scientists, the ginger tabbies and its captive subjects. The army would stamp the entire caboodle with those mysterious words 'top secret' and in doing so make it all disappear; Francis by association also vanished.

The affair, its parties and its particulars no longer existed to anyone lacking a substantial security clearance.

A great deal of time passed while the captive did his utmost to fail to find any acceptance of his new situation. An Army official would visit Francis every day in an ongoing effort to persuade him to collaborate, and either their prisoner would seize the opportunity for a futile attempt at escape, or reiterate his overwhelming disdain for the appalling injustice that had not only been inflicted upon him, but the woman who had her life stolen by a faceless military regime. Francis would frequently be driven to assault his guest; then his guards would enter, restrain and pacify him in an equally violent fashion.

This daily routine continued for weeks, and then dragged on for months. Francis Hawthorn's captors would never attempt to starve him into cooperation, threaten his life or the safety of Cleopawtra in any way. They desperately needed them both in order for their plans to be successful; that was a detail of which Francis was quite confident. He developed the notion that he could simply wait them out; without obtaining his assistance, the project would be unable to proceed and there would be no reason to hold him in custody any longer. The Army would release him, and Francis would be free to return to his house in London with his cat Cleo, and reunite with his lovely Caroline. All that was required of him was that he be patient.

It was a perception with which the man would woefully underestimate the resolve of his superiors; the extent of his miscalculation was to be made quite apparent by the appearance of a gentleman to whom the word 'sinister' could be accurately attributed.

"What if," he had paraphrased in a rough German accent the earlier arguments, "sacrificing the life of one woman would allow you to save the lives of one hundred other people, one thousand or one hundred thousand? "

A sneer gradually crept across the hardened features of the vile character as he began to convey his grim message to his apprehensive audience, and delivered his threats to the dumbfounded prisoner. In short, if the itinerant subject carried on with his refusal to participate in the program, they would take custody of his wife, and use whatever means then available to them to persuade him otherwise.

Initially, Hawthorn could not be convinced to consider their ultimatum at all seriously; it was unthinkable that his army, his government nor his country would ever resort to or endorse such dreadful methods. He decided that it was simply another tactic, a poor attempt to blackmail him, and with a German no less. Francis would even laugh, the tension broken by his rationalization; sadly, it was an outburst met with only the icy stare found in the vast darkness of his messenger's eyes. It had been a faint hope quickly squelched in the uncertainty fostered by the aura the man presented, an impression that the man was unquestioningly capable of carrying out such orders were he furnished with them.

The cost of that sort of gamble would likely be too much for Francis to pay.

Colonel Hawthorn took the only option that remained to him; he unconditionally surrendered, and capitulated to his desire to never inflict any distress, hardship or pain upon his beloved Caroline. He was thereafter condemned to a life of indentured servitude. Crushed by the awful acknowledgment that he would never hold his true love again, Francis sobbed profusely; his captors left him in his cell, broken and beaten, ready to be entered into service as a new and novel ordinance in the arsenal of the vast military machine.

All the affection that Cleopawtra could muster would still prove insufficient with which to console the utter agony felt by her companion. As he absorbed this new wrinkle in the debacle that had completely ruined his life, the heart of the soldier grew a great deal colder. He felt little empathy for his fellow man; the cruelty they had displayed to him was evidence that there was no need for such trivial emotion. Francis had witnessed a good friend casually dispatched by a remorseless enemy, and had been compensated by his country for countless years of service with threats of harm against his beloved wife.

His faith in humanity had gone, wrenched from his poor, tired hands and replaced with nothing.

"As you have already deduced," the unassuming, lanky young man told Francis in his first briefing, "the cat serves as some type of psychic wireless. All of the recovered animals were blue-eyed ginger-tabbies, but we have not yet determined if that is truly of any significance, although it appears the Germans thought that they would be the best suited for the task. The records we recovered indicated that the felines were inbred over several generations in a quest to refine their talent and your cat has had the most successful results to this point."

Francis made a half-hearted attempt to maintain some level of interest, but it was difficult to do so whilst visualizing all of the despicable actions he casually considered inflicting upon the naive scientist. The man paused, and

Hawthorn chose to grant his lecturer a temporary reprieve; however, to his dismay the oral torment resumed after the briefest of respite.

“There has also been evidence that the mechanism functions well over extreme distance, and Army Intelligence feels that this will provide an effective means of facilitating the acquisition of covert information from other countries.” The discourse went on at some length but the condensed version was that the Army wished for Francis to be an undercover agent; they wanted him to spy on their behalf.

He chuckled to himself sarcastically; the betrayed Colonel would be asked to risk his life in an effort to protect the country that had elected to desert him. There was a cruel irony to that.

It was not enough they had taken away his life, the Army would even confiscate his name. Francis Hawthorn no longer, his superiors would know him only as GT Twenty-Two, an operative in the agency identified by the code phrase ‘The First Line.’ He would be known by many other names, monikers he would use in his various guises, but the only constant would be his GT Twenty-Two designation.

The threats placed upon Caroline were felt sufficient to keep him servile; the Army was eager to train their new lapdog and deploy him into the field as soon as possible.

GT Twenty-Two would gather intelligence from both her enemies and her friends for the British Empire; then, the agent would use Cleopawtra to relay the data to his masters through a bizarre code that had likely been devised by the Mad Hatter himself. The would-be spy was taught the complex cipher; he memorized it, and then man and cat were tested repeatedly until such a time as the Army felt confident they could adequately perform their requisite duties.

Once these unique talents were deemed sufficient, the man was schooled in the more common elements of covert operations, those of deception and stealth. He would learn to impersonate all manner of trades and professions, with the objective to infiltrate many kinds of facility, both military and civilian. The man was made to speak both French and German fluently, and a team of personnel collaborated with GT Twenty-Two to develop over a dozen distinct identities, including those of French waiter, German electrician and English physician. He had the facility to manufacture his own documentation; it would be a simple matter for the agent to evaporate into thin air, and then re-appear elsewhere as an entirely dissimilar individual.

He had even learned to overcome his limp.

The spy was skilled in ancient arts of combat he could not even pronounce, and trained to kill using unorthodox methods that had he would never have contemplated. GT Twenty-Two came to fear that he would become as much of a dark instrument as the ominous man who had made threats to the life of his true love, soon coming to the sad realization that at a minimum he was capable of employing those same dastardly methods upon others.

Morality was at his discretion, and an attribute he could suspend if required to realize the aspirations of the glorious British Empire.

The intelligence and prowess shown by the former engineer impressed his superiors greatly. GT Twenty-Two was their star pupil, and Cleopawtra exemplified her role as well; senior military officers and high-ranking government officials alike commended the talents demonstrated by the pair. Not privy to any information regarding the existence of other potential GT operatives, number Twenty-Two was uncertain as to the overall size of the operation, but he was given the impression that, were he and Cleo to prove beneficial, the Army would likely make 'The First Line' one of its predominant methods of communication and intelligence gathering.

It was nearly a full year before the newly trained spy received his first assignment, almost twelve months after GT Twenty-Two had been 'liberated' from his German captivity only to find himself imprisoned by his liberators. He was to covertly locate and identify German scientists who had fled to France in an effort to avoid capture by Allied forces as the Great War had come to a close. The operative and his cat Cleopawtra were secretly spirited away to Paris, then released on their own recognizance. Despite the overwhelming urge to flee from those he despised and, succumbing to his desire to feel her tender embrace if only for one brief moment, run to the arms of his one true love, he feared reprisals against his beloved Caroline for any such action and stayed the course laid out for him.

He had been made painfully aware that his superiors had her under surveillance; they were constantly monitoring her movements, listening to her conversations and reading her mail. A man would always stand ready to follow through with the threats that had been placed against GT Twenty-Two and his wife, the unsuspecting woman who believed that her husband had been killed over a year previously, and who had spent the intervening time mourning the death of the only true love she would ever know; a man who was, actually, quite alive, if not well.

GT Twenty-Two blended into Paris as if he were a native Frenchman; then, he proceeded to hunt his targets as he was trained to, utilizing Cleo for the undetectable wireless that she was intended. He would report the particulars of the rogue Germans, and the British would then silently sweep them away for their

own untold agenda, carefully evading the meddling of the French or the protestations of Germany. The agent was never implicated in the disappearances; he was merely a supporting player in the act of their downfall, overlooked and unseen.

The former Francis was a phantom, a dispossessed man with no identity of his own who leapt from one life of pretence to the next, completing assignments that held no meaning for him. Every new undertaking served only to increase the operative's feelings of insubstantiality. Cleopawtra carried in his arms, he went from small village to tiny hamlet, and to each town with every enforced relocation feeling as if it drained away a small amount of his spirit; the pair was never given the luxury of any place to call their home.

His 'life' was nothing more than a series of lies, deceptions, facades and disguises.

He had only two things left to him. The first was his violin, its music serving to maintain his sanity, and the second was Cleopawtra, the cause for his predicament but also his saviour; she kept him clinging to his humanity by a thread, maintaining a faint grasp upon his soul. Her affection served as a daily reminder of his unending devotion to Caroline; it maintained a small flicker of hope deep within his spirit that one day he would rescue both his wife and himself. They would be together once more, and free of the tyranny that kept them apart.

If it were only possible to get word to her that he was still alive, that they would be together once more, then she would light a candle and place it in the window every night until his return to remain with her forever. Sadly, it appeared quite definite there was not; any attempt at communication between the two would likely be met with severe penalties. GT Twenty-Two would require a means that was not detectable by his overseers, a method that was understood by the two lovers alone.

Somehow, he would find a way. He made a solemn vow that he would, and that they would embrace each other for another time.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE KITTEN AND THE KIBBLE

ONCE UPON A TIME, not too very long after the kind Lady Caroline had taken Edward, presently known as Fatticus to her wondrous castle in the sky, the chubby little kitten began to undertake his first noble quest.

The unfortunate Lady Caroline had been required on a daily basis to reach up above the kitchen shelves to obtain the magical jar that housed Fatticus's kibble; he felt that it would be far kinder to her if he brought the container somewhat closer to the vicinity of the floor. Lady Caroline would be forced to assume such a burden no longer; it would then become a trivial matter for her to acquire his kibble.

Fatticus was certain that he would be doing her a great service. There would be an additional minor benefit; should Lady Caroline be mistaken in her estimation of the kibble required to satisfy the hungry little kitten, the close proximity of his feed would enable his incessantly ravenous stomach to be casually satiated.

There could be no arguments against his motion; it appeared to be quite solidly favourable for all concerned. Indeed, it would be foolish not to proceed with this self-conceived assignment.

Lady Caroline had never wished for Fatticus to climb up on the shelves; he was quite certain that it was because she did not want him to tumble, and injure himself. He did not desire to cause her any concern, so he had stayed the launch of his enterprise until such a time as the woman was in the grips of a fierce battle with the apparatus she referred to as a 'typewriter', a contraption with which she grappled on a regular basis.

The little kitten then quietly jumped down from his preoccupied human's lap, the Lady not in a position to take any notice, and crept away, into the kitchen where he began his assessment of the task that lay before him.

An orchestra played over the wireless the 'William Tell Overture' while Caroline toiled on her most recent novel, telling a customary tale of high-class romance, and affluent social drama. She sniffed repeatedly, the author in the foul clutches of a miserable summer cold; in order to reach for a handkerchief and massage her tender nose, the woman was forced to take frequent pauses in her musings.

She sneezed violently and then, as her outburst had soiled yet another page, groaned in frustration; Caroline would be required to re-type it all. The spoiled paper was jerked with exasperation from the platen, and she began the sheet again.

Meanwhile, the kitten was diligently working to determine his best course of action. The kibble container resided upon the top shelf; its perch was very high, in fact practically to the ceiling. A cabinet dwelled below it, and then two shelves beneath that. Underneath it all was a bench that housed a sink and faucet, with a final row of cabinets, lower. Fatticus searched for any items he could employ in his quest, but his choices were few; Lady Caroline had been diligent, since she held grave trepidation that Fatticus would harm himself, not to leave any such objects accessible should he make any attempt to ascend to the countertop.

He remained undeterred. For the sake of his Lady, the kibble jar would be relocated to a new residence nearer to the floor before the end of the day; the kitten was willing to stake his short life on such a gracious pursuit. Fatticus merely required some trifling assistance in getting his venture 'off of the ground.' He paced, back and forth like a tiger, in front of the lowermost cupboards; his keen eyes probed his surroundings for any potential avenues upon which to travel, and complete the first stage of his mission. Unfortunately, the kitten failed to detect any.

Perhaps, he considered there could conceivably exist some sort of passage, deep within the cupboards, that led to the land up above; it might just be that there was a secret tunnel that had been constructed, in their own quests to conquer the mountain of wood and metal, by cats during the days of long ago.

It was an idea that he felt held sufficient credibility to investigate.

The symphony rose to a shrill crescendo as the writer feverishly related a scene in which her primary characters, a young lady and her youthful escort, danced to a waltz at a masquerade ball. Their tryst was condemned to proceed no further; her father was of too high a station to ever grant her the right to marry the simple soldier who held her waist and took her hand. They moved to embrace silently; the music and even the party itself faded away, as if only the two lovers remained. The star-crossed souls were to be entwined forever in their gentle expression of affection, and never to be disturbed by the petty notions of society.

In the kitchen, Fatticus, in an effort to pull open one of the cabinet doors, made vigorous use of his paw; however, the thoughtful Lady Caroline had secured it, not wishing the portly little kitten to lose his way in the frightening world that existed on the other side. All attempts to persuade the gateway to allow him entrance were frustrated, and he proceeded onward to the next with a similarly unsatisfying result. The third door was also unwilling to grant passage to the little adventurer, but the fourth had been improperly fastened; it yielded to the kitten, yawning its great jaws apart and beckoning him within.

His resolve wavered momentarily; terrible memories, in which he had been trapped inside another such foreboding place, rose to the surface of his juvenile consciousness and implored him to take heed of the past lest he repeat the unpleasant event. Fatticus swiftly cast his recollections aside, calling upon his bravery to douse the flames of his fear; for the benefit of his good Lady Caroline, and for the wellbeing of his tummy, his assignment could not be abandoned. He boldly strode forth into the cupboard and initiated the hunt for the secret passage the kitten was confident he would soon discover.

The mouth of the cabinet abruptly shut behind him. It was indeed a dark and scary realm; for a brief moment, it was as if Fatticus had only just entered Missus Glenferrie's pantry for the first time and, as he had on that day long ago, the kitten turned to panic. The ill-fated little creature was once again lost, disoriented and unable to find his way. Despite this, he had grown; his maturity enabled Fatticus to regain control, taking charge of his fear and mastering it.

Having then composed himself, his search had resumed.

Out in the study, Caroline sneezed yet again; however, on this occasion, she was able to cover her mouth before any further damage was done. For a moment, she grew concerned at the newly revealed absence of her kitten, but she was too engrossed in her writing, and was not willing to waste what little strength she had to rummage about the flat for him.

Caroline carried on with the account of her two lovers covert rendezvous, the clandestine relationship that had blossomed, and the love that they had cultivated; their bond was so harshly decried by her father, a mean-spirited monster that would never permit her happiness. It was a familiar formula; even so, each time she reused the vanilla-flavoured plotline the writer would repackage it with fresh backdrops, and decorate it with differing circumstances, producing a narrative that her loyal audience would find as engaging as any they had previously read.

The author, regarding her prose was rather particular; she adhered to a strict set of self-imposed rules. For example, Caroline found contractions to be uncouth and vulgar; one ought not, she would argue, write how one spoke. As

well, 'had not' and 'hadn't' were not substantially different in their consumption of ink; therefore, there was no proper reason to employ such abominations.

Fragments, she similarly abhorred; the use of the word 'and' twice in the same sentence the woman staunchly avoided. Commas and semi-colons were sprinkled liberally. Nouns, pronouns, verbs and adverbs Caroline all chose cautiously, to preclude repetition as much as was feasible. There were several other conventions. Literature, and of this she was quite firm, was an institution that should not be trifled with. As a result, her language was both formal and dramatic; she would not have it any other way. It was merely how she wrote.

In the meantime, the expedition in the cupboard had continued, all manner of things having been thoroughly investigated by the little kitten and found to be of no aid to his search. The crestfallen Fatticus had been forced to conclude that there was no passage after all; he had combed over every square inch of the cavernous interior until he was completely convinced of it. In his examination, every carton had been tipped over, and every jar thrown aside, but his ransacking had all been for naught; the brave knight had progressed no further in his quest than when he had begun, and was rather perturbed by the apparent lack of any further options.

Caroline's fictional soldier was a simple corporal, once a stable boy who, as a child, had been known to the Heroine; the boy had run away in a bid to win her heart, to join the Army and return a man. It had not yet been decided if this most recent incarnation of the author's signature tale would be a tragedy, and the lovers would be kept apart, or if it would have a more comic conclusion, allowing the pair to be together. This was completely at the writer's discretion; her temperament at a crucial moment in the narrative would lead the fictional couple to their then-predestined fate.

The kitten nudged at the unsecured exit; it happily swung open again, and released him back into the world at large. He had the curious thought that he could scale the edge of the door, and then ascend to the countertop above; there was no certainty that such a plan would succeed, but no further alternatives seemed to be forthcoming. He pushed a pint of preserves with his nose, rolling it out of the cupboard and on to the floor, where it prevented the door from closing completely; it was jammed ajar sufficiently such that Fatticus could employ his tiny little claws, and clamber up the impromptu ladder.

Currently, the author's mood was one of illness, and her poor health was not likely to sway her decision in any particular direction. Caroline could not bring herself to foster any concern over the destiny of her characters; for all it mattered, to her they could, during a fit of ritualistic pagan passion, fall into a volcano. It had just so happened that, whilst resting in bed, an infrequent moment of inspiration had chosen to appear to the disease-inflicted author; such

instances were too precious to simply be cast off merely due to viral invasion and ignored.

As a consequence, the woman was, when it was a challenge to simply remain upright, instead positioned in front of her typewriter, regaling the keys with a legend of bravery and cruelty such as the world had seen little enough of that it was still willing to pay for the privilege of reading it.

While Lady Caroline carried on with her own quest to find tasty morsels, hers of the English language, Fatticus was in the midst of making repeated attempts to mount the cupboard door. He had first taken a measured approach by carefully calculating each grasp, and pulling himself up slowly; however, he was repeatedly confounded when he reached the midpoint of his journey by a loss of grip. He soon abandoned the method, and chose to instead scramble frantically at the edge in the hope that his claws would gain purchase upon the wood a sufficient number of times with which to permit his ascent.

This hasty mode of assault lacked any greater productivity; the kitten was still unable to achieve any greater altitude than that of half the height of the door.

A cry of elation emerged from the study as Caroline stumbled upon a plausible outcome for her romantic narrative. The ginger-haired adventurer froze in his place; Lady Caroline's outburst presented the unhappy possibility that he would be imminently discovered, and then severely chastised. The seconds sluggishly passed, ticking by monotonously until Fatticus was tentatively confident that the human was indeed not heading in his general direction. Slowly and carefully, he resumed his climb; as he approached the cursed midpoint, Caroline emitted another outburst, producing a horrendous sneeze that prompted the startled kitten to scuttle madly to the top.

The author had concluded that a duel, a swashbuckling confrontation of swords, was to be had between the soldier and the father of his affection. They would fight it out in a contest that was intended to be to the death; in its stead, the Hero, in exchange for the hand of the Heroine, would spare the life of his opponent, the Villain. The sequence of events would likely prove one quite thrilling and exhilarating; her thesaurus would provide a chorus of apt descriptions, with each note equally as appropriate. The narrative would be easily lengthened to fill dozens of desperately needed pages.

Caroline would propose that his infantry commander had schooled the soldier in the art of swordplay, that officer himself having been taught by the Villain; the two rivals would then be evenly matched. It would provide the essential 'twist' that was necessary to make the novel palatable.

Fatticus the Frightened remained firmly affixed, to the top of the door like an alligator clip; his little claws were cemented firmly into the wood with the

goal of preserving his precarious position. He dared not move, lest the door shake and toss the kitten into the depths below; however, he could not linger on his perch forever. His next manoeuvre would require him to traverse the remaining distance to the countertop; if he failed, it would spell the end of his enterprise. Fatticus the Acrobat rose, and then, like a tightrope walker, nervously balanced himself upon the edge of the violently quaking precipice; he cautiously inched towards the countertop until he was finally prepared to make his leap to safety.

The world up above fascinated the kitten; it held a landscape upon which water dripped lazily out of a twisted metal cylinder that emerged from the wall into a shiny silver bowl; he surmised that the basin could hold a lifetime's supply of kibble. Fatticus the Thirsty paused to refresh himself, catching the droplets with his paw and licking them off; the liquid felt fresh and crisp on his parched tongue. He resisted the urge to loiter at the faucet; his quest must resume. When his journey had been brought to completion, there would be plenty of time for leisure.

The resolute kitten soldiered on.

Caroline the Novelist similarly continued her epic encounter with her typewriter, fighting to adequately convey the finer details of the passionate confrontation between the Hero and the Villain; she passed the advantage back and forth between the two characters in true swashbuckling style. The writer was somewhat pleased with how her proceedings were unfolding; she had revealed that it was the Hero's commander who previously described to his subordinate the beauty of the Heroine, and that the soldier, having recalled the young girl from his childhood, was then motivated to seek her out once more.

As well, the Hero knew a secret, a crucial piece of information told to him by his commander on his deathbed. It was a revelation that could destroy the Villain, and a token that the young man could additionally use in barter to obtain the hand of his enemy's daughter. As their swords lay crossed at each other's throats, he whispered it softly into his adversary's ear; the father turned as white as a spectre and, as he absorbed the significance of this ghastly turn of events, the blood drained from his features. His pause gave the Hero the chance he needed to seize the decisive advantage, and place the then vulnerable swordsman in a position of total jeopardy.

Stationed firmly upon the kitchen bench, the kitten contemplated his next move. The two shelves above him appeared relatively easy to navigate, but they were inset beneath the cabinet that the stout little mountaineer would next need to negotiate; it was going to make it tricky to clamber up into the cupboard, even if he were able to open one of its doors. Then, there was the question of how to keep the entrance open whilst scaling the edge of it, as he had done from the floor below.

The complexities began to overwhelm the adolescent feline; his anxiety began to build, casting doubt on the future of his mission.

Caroline had her Hero contemplate the merits of permitting the defeated Villain to live quite carefully; the victorious swordsman internally debated the pros and cons over several pages of her rapidly expanding novel. The secret was indeed rather devastating; the beaten man was nothing more than a common criminal. The petty thief had inherited his noble title from a remote second cousin.

His death, once the scandal was revealed, would raise no objections; the Hero felt that if he disposed of the scoundrel justice would be well served.

Nevertheless, he knew that the Heroine still loved her father very much and, despite his despicable actions, she would likely be deeply troubled by his demise. That his death would come at the hands of her Hero would be too painful for her to bear; the young man concluded that he could not be the instrument of such grief, regardless of whatever crimes the rogue had committed. The Hero chose to spare the Villain's life and in return, the rascal swore to change his wicked ways; he offered in reparations his daughter's hand to the swordsman that had bested him.

Fatticus casually observed that there were spikes, wooden spears with pieces of cloth hanging from them, protruding from the left side of the cabinet. The kitten was delighted with the discovery; it meant that there was still some chance his task would be completed after all. He scrambled up onto the second shelf, struggling to pull his round bottom up with him, until he was right below the base of the cabinetry overhead. He reached, stretching his fat little body out as far as he could, his little paw grasping for a dishrag that hung down in front of him from one of the spikes above. Fatticus reached a whisker's breadth further with each attempt, until the very tip of his outermost claw succeeded to snag the nearest thread of the fabric of the cloth; he was then able to bring the dishtowel into his firm grasp.

Concluding her tale, Caroline painted the final portrait. She ran to him, the Heroine ran to her Hero and placed her arms around his neck; the man held her in a firm embrace as they embarked upon an expression of love that would take several paragraphs to fully describe. The author penned a display of affection that Caroline was confident would only ever exist within the pages of a romance novel; their kiss was one to which it was certain all others would be measured, and fail to compare.

Then, with the book finished and her writing ended the ailing, but contented author began to rouse her weary legs, to make the journey back to her bedchamber where she could retire for the remainder of the day, and rest her disease-ridden corpse.

Fatticus had since easily conquered the towel; like an alpine climber on a familiar face, his claws had made short work of the ascent. He then swapped over to another rag, and then one more; he quickly found himself at the top of the course, perched upon the highest spike like a cockatoo and surveying his kingdom below. It was, at that very moment, that the kitten caught his first glimpse of the flat mouse; the tiny brown rodent had wisely chosen this period of feline indisposition to forage on the kitchen floor for crumbs.

If the ginger-tabby had possessed one, he would have eaten his hat. The matter of the mouse would simply have to wait for another time; his present activity was of far greater significance. He twisted his wide, but nimble body around to his left; he strained to reach his tiny little nose over the edge of the cupboard. Then, he leapt with all the strength that he could muster, and landed on the summit; his victory was imminent.

The kitten ran for his prized kibble jar, ordained to liberate it from its imprisonment on the top of the cabinetry. Fatticus then did what he had come so far to do; he pushed the crockery off the ledge.

Caroline arrived at the entrance of the kitchen at an appropriate moment in which to observe the jar fall from its position of relative safety on the topmost shelf. The clay cookie crock, which she had delegated to contain kitty kibble, tumbled from where she had, to preclude her fat little kitten from gorging himself and then regurgitating his gluttony in unfortunate locations such as the seat of her chair, carefully placed it.

Much to her surprise but yet not, the kitten was occupying the space in which the container formerly resided; he was seemingly confused as to whether he ought to be pleased with himself for his accomplishments, or if it would be better to fear the likely consequences of being caught so obviously red-handed.

Whilst Fatticus considered his conundrum, the crock persisted in its fatal plunge, striking the unforgiving tile floor suddenly; it fractured into a hundred pieces and, as the tiny mouse ran for its life, shards of pottery intermixed with kibble spread out from the epicentre of the impact over the entire length and breadth of the kitchen. The gravely ill Caroline could merely gawk at the horrific event, powerless to prevent the incident from proceeding upon its natural course; the concepts of gravity and inertia were demonstrated quite effectively courtesy of a rotund ginger-tabby with an insatiable appetite, and a nose for trouble.

Discretion was again the better part of valour; the kitten felt it best to maintain his place on top of the cabinetry until his Lady Caroline chose to see reason and her rage, over Fatticus's 'accident,' had abated. In his defence, he had no prior understanding that the jar would shatter in such a spectacular fashion, and no comprehension that it would fail to withstand the excursion to the floor.

Quite frankly, that the crockery had not been of sufficient standard to tolerate such a minor collision was not his responsibility.

Fatticus was certain that his guardian would come in the end to appreciate his position, but until that time he would remain firmly pressed against the back wall, evading Caroline's haphazard grasps whilst the woman attempted to coax him into reach with counterproductive curses and threats of bodily injury.

It should be once more noted here that the author would never do anything to intentionally harm her kitten. Fatticus had never been, in spite of his frequent antics, hurt by Caroline. The kitten thoroughly trusted that she could never willingly cause him suffering.

All the same, there was no reason to test his theory in this context if it were not necessary.

Eventually, unable to get her livid fingers around the feline destroyer of clay cookie jars, Caroline capitulated and, using what little strength she had left to muster, began the tedious process of tidying the calamity that populated her kitchen floor. She had two comforts. First, there was the knowledge that she had completed her novel; that would enable her to purchase a new container of superior durability. Second, she had the certainty that the awful, but evidently rather industrious little kitten would eventually be forced to descend from his tower.

For the sake of Fatticus the Naughty, Lady Caroline would not be, it was hoped, quite so cross with him when he did.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE LITTLEST WARRIOR

THE FLOOR OF THE STEEL CAGE felt cold to her diminutive paws and, her brothers and sisters gathered about her all trying to do likewise, the kitten did her best to nestle for warmth into her mother's ginger-fur. Around her echoed hundreds of tiny cries; a few of them were those of her siblings, but the vast majority originated from far beyond the metallic bars that kept the kittens, and their mother sheltered from the forbidding world beyond.

It was the only reality that the infantile ginger-tabby had ever known. Sharp noises frequently terrified the, mere weeks-old, cat; the disquieting snarlings of strange monsters contributed to the constant, unending cacophony of sound. In such a macabre atmosphere, she could but only suckle at her mother's teat, do her utmost to stay warm and, whenever possible, try to sleep. To mature was her sole assignment; she would soon increase in size, grow fur and open her eyes. Eventually, the kitten would be capable of fending for herself; then, perhaps she would face whatever horrors awaited her beyond the bars of the cage.

She heard cries of sadness, fear and outright terror. The varied voices of adults, kittens and newborns were all present; they comprised an ensemble, serving to compose a melody of misery. Those calls that were alarmed the most were never heard from further; that realization greatly troubled the little kitten. She began to imagine a foul demon; one responsible for the terrible acts that amongst her kin had caused such suffering. Her rather limited scope of experience could only conjure nebulous images of darkness; as such, she envisioned a creature of naught that enveloped its unsuspecting victims in nothingness, and whisked them away from their families to empty shadows where they were condemned to endure an eternity alone.

The kitten could conceive of no worse fate. Cries from mothers searching for their missing young served only to confirm her suspicions, and reinforce her belief in the shadowy beast that she felt would inevitably take her from her

mother and her siblings, spiriting her away forever. However, the kitten refused to accept that this would be her destiny; she vowed to fight, and use whatever means at her disposal to ensure that the evil creature would never do harm to any of her kin ever again.

She grew; the ginger-tabby kitten learned to eat the hard kibble that appeared daily, as if by magic, in a bowl mounted to the side of her cage. From a little tube that poked its way through the bars she drank; when it no longer supplied moisture it would temporarily disappear, and then return, providing the liquid once more. The kitten soon surmised that certain other monsters performed these vital tasks; she had observed a huge fleshy paw, the colour of her mother's belly, sweep down and fly off with the container, while another such creature then momentarily installed its replacement.

As they provided sustenance for her, her mother and her kin, these monsters were identified to be good. The kitten began to lose her fear of them; whilst they went about their daily tasks, studied them intensely. Her vision improved and, as the weeks went by, she could see more of the world beyond the bars through her tiny blue eyes. There appeared to be many other cages, in every direction, as far as the little kitten could see; all appeared to hold numerous other kittens, which stared back at her with the same curiosity that she displayed towards them.

She was content, for it seemed that there was no dark, kitten-stealing demon, after all.

The kitten whiled away the hours in wonderment of the world around her, and cheerfully held, with kin from other cages, silent conversations; they discussed what fantastic opportunities might lie in store for them. Then one day, the unthinkable happened; right before the little kitten's terrified eyes, one of the heretofore beneficial feeding monsters proceeded to tear a hole in the top of a nearby cage, then dart into it and, with one of her silent friends in its clutches, fly away. The captured kitten screamed as it was spirited away in abject terror; it quickly vanished from her view, and its cries were soon heard no further.

The monsters were her friends no longer. The kitten prepared to do battle with her sworn enemy. Every spare moment was spent observing their movements and behaviours. That information would be used to prepare a well-considered plan of attack. She would have in her favour the element of surprise; when they came for her, they would not expect her resistance, and would be completely unprepared for the onslaught that she would unleash upon them. It would be an effort to not only save herself, but to teach the foul beasts a lesson, one that spelled out clearly the message that they were to henceforth leave her fellows alone.

That day would not be long in coming. Early one morning, the top of the cage was torn asunder and soon one of the monsters, on its deadly search for new prey entered through the hole. The other kittens ran to their mother and tried to hide, but not her; she stood her ground and, as she steadied herself for her impending attack, measured the beast. The intruder flew down, approaching the kitten with no suspicion of the assault that she was preparing to unleash upon it; when it was within range of the small, ginger-haired creature, she suddenly leaped up, buried her tiny little claws into the foul demon and ripped with her razor-sharp teeth into its flesh.

A howl of torment emanated from somewhere high above, and the monster began to rise quickly in retreat; however, the courageous little kitten was not satisfied, and she would not release herself from it. At the beast she kicked, her claws fully extended, with her hind legs; she sought to exact revenge for the kidnapping of the others from it, obtain penance for the evil deeds in which it had partaken, and attain justice for the cruelties that it and its brothers had imposed upon them all.

The creature, in an attempt to dislodge the kitten shook wildly; she could not be detached. This was her purpose, her destiny, and she would not forsake it.

The shaking stopped; the terrible creature was seemingly defeated. The kitten ceased her attack, and then she looked up to see an angry eye on a hairless face stare down upon her; to her assault, upon the fleshy beast that had attempted to take her away, it was quite obviously opposed. The kitten quickly concluded that it must be the commander of the monsters; there could be no other reason, toward her noble attempts to destroy the demon, for any such offence to be taken.

Defeating this Eye would be her next challenge.

Before this terrible new enemy could move out of reach, she commenced her subsequent attack; as if it comprised the root of all evil, she leapt at the eye and, anchoring herself to the face that held it with her tiny claws, she bit at whatever presented itself to her sharp little teeth. On her pursuit, she expended all of her energy; she no longer feared the consequences of her actions, and cared only that she had done her duty in the service of her kind. What needed to be done was finished; the monsters had been succinctly informed that they would not go willingly, without a fight.

Two monsters clutched at her and eventually succeeded at pulling her away from the eye, holding her trapped between them. The battle was then apparently lost. Not yet ready to surrender, the kitten bit with all of her might into one of the monster's snaking tendrils, and obligingly they released her. She fell, plummeting towards the floor below; having never fallen anywhere before, the kitten did not know if she would survive such a vast descent.

When she landed safely, she was relieved; promptly, it was decided that she ought to make her escape. The kitten was determined to live on and fight her oppressors another day. As fast as she could, the renegade ran; through the great cavern, teeming with kittens she was chased by a howling Titan. The giant's minions repeatedly reached out; however, the monsters were unable to grasp her, and proved themselves incapable of capturing the brave little creature that persisted to elude them as she ran through the cave that appeared to stretch off into the distance forever.

Unfortunately, for the kitten forever was, in this case, a fixed quantity. A great wall soon loomed up ahead of the escapee, and she hopelessly realized that she was finished; the terrible monsters would shortly detain the feline, and serve upon her then indescribable retribution. Too weak, and tired to fight any longer she prepared to surrender. The ginger-tabby stopped at the wall, then turned around, to face her executioners and meet their fury, unleashed by what she had done.

The giant howled with rage, and compelled its monsters toward her; the little kitten courageously awaited their final terrible assault.

"Hans, you oaf, leave the poor kitten alone." The giant looked up at his colleague; his revenge against the cat that had done him so much harm was abruptly aborted.

"*Gott in Himmel!* I will have you know that this 'kitten' just tried to remove my eye with its teeth," Hans Wannemaker protested as he massaged the numerous wounds on his face. "It cannot stay here; it is not safe to keep it around."

"She was just frightened." Doctor Schultz admonished Hans. "You leave the kitten with me." Hans reluctantly submitted and, frustrated by his inability to take retribution from the creature that had injured him so, wandered off elsewhere in the facility to sulk. The doctor then carefully bent down to the little kitten, and tried to calm her with quiet speech; whilst making no sudden movements, he slowly moved his hands towards her, and provided no cause to encourage the poor kitten to run off again.

The feline was flabbergasted when, rather than being done away with in a vile fashion, this new pair of monsters instead gently picked her up, and rubbed against her fur in a manner that pleased her very much. She began to purr, a sound that she had only ever before made for her mother; the pleasant monsters stroked her further, and the kitten soon forgot all about the earlier nastiness surrounding her encounter with the evil monsters and the grotesque, angry Eye.

The kind monsters carried her down the cavern, and finally placed her into another cage; she was alone but, having been comforted by her new friends into a profound sense of peace, was no longer afraid.

As he gazed upon the unruly little kitten, the doctor smiled. On a piece of paper, he wrote the number '64;' it was then affixed to the cage. This one had spirit, he thought; she would be a good candidate for the program. Subject Sixty-Four held a great deal of promise; of that, he felt certain.

"You will be my personal pet project," Schultz jovially told the little kitten, who mewed sadly as he left her in her new home. "Do not fret. I will return, soon."

He then reflected as he walked. It had been rather enjoyable to observe the painful feats the cat had performed upon the generally disagreeable Hans. Whilst he re-envisioned the comedic battering that the kitten had suffered upon his dim-witted subordinate, he vigorously chuckled; the feline had quite effectively wiped the man's grating, perpetual smirk from his long, gaunt face.

Doctor Schultz filed away the humorous images for further reference, and returned his mind to the subject at hand. The idea of telepathic cats had long been considered to be an 'old wives tale;' nevertheless, it was one that the German scientists had recently been able to prove true. Not all members of the species held the talent, however. The team had studied several breeds of cat but, with some mild inclination demonstrated by the Himalayan breed, only the ginger-tabbies had shown any real promise. They had then made the decision to crossbreed the two, producing ginger-tabbies with blue eyes; this novel combination was found to be far superior to any others.

As they selectively further bred them, it only became more evident that the Germans had successfully discovered their potential saviours; the blue-eyed ginger-tabbies were, to their intended task, well suited. Breeding then continued in earnest; they would soon have all the felines that were required to place into operation their desperately needed telepathic communications system.

Perhaps Subject Sixty-Four would be one of them; with the current state of the war, he hoped that it would not be a case of too little, too late.

The doctor was to interview a recent English prisoner-of-war and assess his prospective value to the program. They urgently needed clairvoyant human counterparts to pair with their telepathic feline subjects, and Allied prisoners could potentially be persuaded to act as spies on their behalf; as well as being conducive to brainwashing, their imprisonment provided additional advantages to their psychic conditioning. Whatever became of the scientists efforts, there was simply no reason not to exploit the resource; at a minimum, their observations

would add to the growing volume of German clairvoyant research. Schultz went to examine the captive.

Meanwhile, life for the little kitten continued peacefully. The kind monsters returned to visit her every day following her rescue from the clutches of the evil Eye; she warmly welcomed her new friends. Occasionally, the monsters would carry Subject Sixty-Four to another place, and affix her into a strange contraption where she would be made to stare at unusual shapes, but she did not mind that much; she was unharmed, well pet, and her belly was tastily rewarded for her efforts.

As the sessions continued, an old friend had rejoined her. Subject Forty-Two, the kitten that was previously observed being taken away by the monsters would sit silently with her while viewing the pictures. They were partners in whatever endeavour the monsters had undertaken; the details of which did not concern her as long as she continued to be well-treated, given affection and fed.

Time passed, and the scientists commenced to alternate the shapes between the two kittens. The subjects began to know what figure their partner was viewing, and the scientists measured the recognition in their striking blue eyes. The monsters were quite pleased and, in compensation for their labours, showered the two little kittens with much gratitude. Before long, the pair started to see what the other saw even when they were not looking at the images nor, further still, present together in the same room.

Then, quite unexpectedly Subject Sixty-Four was taken from her little cage and thrust into a very large one; the kitten remained trapped there with a frightening, fresh monster, which she did not recognize. It was a creature that, unbeknownst to her, would soon become her life-long companion.

The monster was called Francis, and he named her Cleopawtra.

She came to love both the name, and Francis, very much.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

OF MICE AND MEN

THE THOMSON YOUNG READER'S Digest of Poetry and Prose published 'The Queen, the Beast and the Fireplace' and 'The Witch's Familiar,' each written by Caroline Hawthorn, a couple of uneventful weeks after she had submitted them to her mildly disappointed editor. They had typeset the two timely, seasonal stories intact; the strange, fortune cookie-like postscripts survived to the printing press as well.

Feeling perhaps that young mothers would recognize her name and then purchase the periodical for their children, the publishers had chosen to declare Caroline's presence in the publication quite profoundly upon the front cover.

The commotion that the new magazine had made of her change in direction flattered Caroline; however, a distinct lack in the production, on her typewriter, of any further efforts soon became a matter of concern. She joked with Fatticus that he was failing to 'pull his weight;' it was a poor sort of double-entendre to which he merely glanced at her queerly, emitted a snough, and then trundled off to his other various feline pursuits. It appeared rather likely that the cat was completely unaware his thoughts might have made their improbable way to Caroline's literary fingers.

Whether the spontaneous compositions had been the result of her subconscious seizing control of her body, or if they were the manifestations of some strange telepathy between author and tabby, she hoped only for an encore performance. If the issue traded well, she would be under a great deal of pressure to produce further tales; unfortunately, she was afflicted with writer's block once again, and her typewriter yielded nothing, not even any of the bizarre gibberish.

There was not yet a crisis. They were sound financially, at least for the moment; however in a month or two, as it would then be winter and their needs would cost more, they would likely be in trouble again.

Caroline wanted to know how it worked, and to discover how she could make the phenomenon reoccur. In this way, she would be able to establish their future security; the ‘talent’ would need to be reliable enough that she, when necessary, could call upon it. She spent a great deal of time staring at Fatticus, studying him while he slept and made, with no real success, her best efforts to eavesdrop upon the slumbering animals fantasies. Caroline tried her utmost to imagine about what he could be dreaming, but failed miserably; her ability to empathize with pussycats was at that point somewhat limited.

Fatticus was starting to wonder if Caroline was contemplating the notion of eating him; he was mildly concerned that she had inadvertently become deficient in her own supply of kibble and was secretly plotting, into a steaming pot of pussycat stew, for his demise. The cat did not take his ghastly notion very seriously; nonetheless, he did begin to foster a small measure of paranoia. He did his best to cast his suspicions away; they were too absurd even for his wildly colourful imagination.

However, if Caroline was not measuring him for the baking pan, then an answer was still required regarding her motives for passing so much of her time gazing upon her fat, ginger-haired flatmate.

One otherwise uneventful day she had sat in her typing chair, and stared at him whilst he lay sprawled out upon his red Chinese carpet in the centre of the study floor, absorbing the sunshine that streamed through the window. Fatticus was doing what he could to ignore the human, and partake in some well-deserved naptime when, unexpectedly, the noise of a hundred bells, all ringing out in rapid succession brought the cat abruptly to his feet. His anxiety rose to panic and, as if his tail had been set on fire, the cat began to dart about the flat.

Fatticus ran to the front door and, finding no escape, ran back to the study in which he found no exit either. This prompted his return to the former entrance; the cat then, in a crazed effort to escape the cursed bells that persisted with their frightening racket dashed to and fro between them.

Trepidation filled Caroline; it was rare for her to receive a telephone call and, on such infrequent occasions, the messenger would typically convey regrettable news. The cat’s feral reaction to the ringing did nothing to assist her efforts to compose her thoughts sufficiently such as to make a decision regarding whether she ought to answer the piercing summons, or not.

Caroline decided to pick up the receiver. “Hello,” she stated blandly into the mouthpiece, and then waited anxiously for the response. Regarding this, her mind considered the likely possibilities; either someone had died, or the author had become delinquent in paying a debt. The ‘technological wonder’ only served to provide the world with a more direct method of disturbing Caroline’s attempts at maintaining a simple, stress-reduced lifestyle.

That being the case, she questioned the reasoning for having a telephone in the first place. The perception that, should her mother took a turn for the worse, the hospital would be capable of contacting her quickly had originally persuaded her to acquire the instrument. However, Caroline's mother was of fine health, and it would likely be some time before she took physically ill; every day that passed she simply sat at the window, her mind long since gone astray, and aged.

It appeared that there was no presence on the other end of the line or, if there was, the caller appeared to have nothing to say. "Hello," Caroline repeated herself, sternly, in the hope of prompting her caller into some sort of vocal response; despite her urging, no further communication transpired, and the author soon moved to return the receiver onto its hook.

Suddenly a voice spoke, that of a man, deep and urgent. "The yellow tortoise sails upon a green sea."

"I beg your pardon," Caroline said cautiously, thrown off her guard by the abrupt declaration, "I am not quite sure that I heard you correctly."

The voice spoke again, irritated, annoyed, and with a rough German accent; "The yellow tortoise sails upon a green sea," it repeated, the tone signalling an expectation of response to the bizarre query. The writer was at a complete loss for words, and had nothing with which to respond to the strange voice at the other end of the telephone. She considered the likelihood that someone who had read her anecdotes in the youth magazine was engaging in some sort of hoax; however, she did not publish her telephone number and as such, it should not have been accessible to members of the public.

"I believe you have reached the wrong extension. Good day." She hung up the receiver then, curtly and with a certain amount of relief, as if she had rid herself of a hot potato. Caroline was most certainly not going to play games with some anonymous nuisance. She had much more sensible ways to spend her time, such as napping, eating, bathing and attempting to read the thoughts of her cat.

Perhaps the last item on her itinerary failed in sensibility but, at the very least, it was a great deal less unnerving than fielding mysteriously eerie telephone calls.

Fatticus had recovered somewhat from his unfortunate attack of anxiety, and the cat rubbed himself up against Caroline's legs in an effort to show her that he was in fact all right. The whole episode was rather humiliating; his bravado had been 'knocked for six' by his cowardly response to the infernal telephone. He stood as tall as possible while Caroline massaged his head, rubbing him in that spot behind the ear in the way that he loved so dearly; then, the pint-sized tiger

turned smartly, marching off in search of some means by which he could regain his pride, and recover his bruised ego.

If one was to believe Fatticus's own press, he was a fearless hunter who was intimidated by nothing, a terror of the animal kingdom, a threat to all and victim to none. All he needed to do to make things right in his world once more was to reinforce those simple facts. The tabby made his pledge to that endeavour, and stalked off to find a quarry to whose misfortune the cat would demonstrate his alleged superiority.

His conduct daring any and all comers to challenge his dominance over his domain, he stamped heavily into the kitchen.

Fortune was smiling heavily on Fatticus that day, for right in front of his astonished eyes sat the brown-haired flat mouse. It was casually chewing on a piece of his kibble, in the centre of the tiled kitchen floor.

For as long as the cat could remember, Fatticus had been locked in a battle of wits with the mouse. Of course, the rodent had never actually outsmarted the tabby; the hunter had merely been forced due to circumstances of higher priority to withdraw from their many previous chases. There would always arrive a moment at which the cat would be required to eat, take a nap or attend to the needs of his human, of which there were many. His pursuit would simply be superseded by one of higher precedence; there was nothing further to the issue than that.

Truthfully, had he a limitless amount of time with which to expend mounting a campaign against the rodent, the mouse would long since have found its way into his stomach.

It appeared to Fatticus that the occasion had finally come in which the cat would be given ample opportunity to capture the vermin. Fatticus would soon march proudly over to Caroline, his trophy in his mouth and, presenting it for his Lady's inspection, drop it at her feet. As to the character of the ginger-tabby, there would no longer be any doubt; he would have proved his worth once and for all. There would be no further mention of the nonsense that had occurred earlier that afternoon.

The mouse froze, painfully aware of the presence of his friendly neighbourhood predator. Hope burned deep in its little rodent heart that the cat had failed to recognize it, and the behemoth would simply carry on his merry way.

Sadly, the beast had indeed identified the unfortunate scavenger, but had chosen to permit the mouse to make the first move; the strategy was designed to give the carnivore the ability to optimize his trajectory of attack. However, the

rodent remained fixed, unconvinced that it had been detected and, as a result, the pair became locked in a stalemate that had the potential to become perpetual.

Fatticus had dedicated himself to this fight in entirety; the mouse would be his that day, despite whatever sacrifices his ambition demanded. His prey, in turn, would do anything required to avoid the loss of its already brief life. As a result, the adversaries remained motionless while time carried on; seconds became minutes, and those turned to hours.

The sun began to set, and the hungry human would make her way to the kitchen in search of her supper. She turned on the lamp and, when her eyes readily spotted the marooned mouse in the middle of her kitchen floor, exclaimed loudly; her cry ended the impasse, and sent the mouse scurrying hurriedly right past the nose of the unwary Fatticus, through the doorway. It rapidly made its way towards the entrance to the flat, seeking safety through a hole in the skirting boards that lay beside it.

The cat regained his senses presently, and then placed his hindquarters in high gear. His backside bouncing like a grotesque medicine ball, he lumbered down the hallway after the speeding rodent.

The determined feline swiftly gained ground upon the mouse, inching nearer to his target each imperial yard that the chase progressed down the passageway. It would be a very close contest indeed; the outcome, at that moment was impossible to predict.

Caroline intently watched the proceedings, uncertain of which party to root for. On the one hand, it would be good of Fatticus to dispose of the annoying rodent; she was not that fond of sweeping up the 'mouse dirt' that turned up on her kitchen bench. However, on the other, the rodent was rather cute, and she did not feel that any creature that endearing deserved to meet, at the claws of her obese tabby cat, such a gruesome fate.

Caroline ruled in favour of the mouse.

"FATTICUS!" she screeched, hopeful that her cry would divert the cat from his lethal purpose, and permit the rodent a chance to escape.

The cat turned his head to locate the origin of the call; the distraction caused his mind to stray from the task at hand, then devoid of anything other than the echo of his name being spoken. Despite his focus no longer being directed on his quarry, his momentum continued to carry him forward, towards the rather solid wood door that physics dictated the cat would soon encounter.

The mouse successfully evaded capture by the charging red beast, and entered its foxhole; its pursuer, rather than engaging in intimate contact with the unforgiving barrier in front of him, instead did something rather unexpected.

“Is it not extraordinary,” Caroline pondered, aloud, “when your cat, just as it was about to collide with a quite solid door, suddenly vanishes?” She provided no reply to her rhetorical query and instead stood in a shocked silence, staring at an empty hallway that showed sign of neither mouse, nor cat. There was then momentarily a frantic scratching, and a howl of pure desperation from the cat that was trapped on the wrong side of the entrance to his own home.

His Lady Caroline readmitted her feline companion, her mind striving to reconcile the contradiction that she had just witnessed; the equally bewildered feline returned inside to safety, with a feeble attempt at an air of quiet dignity. Fatticus made his way back down the hallway to the bedroom, where he then jumped up on to his spot at the end of the bed, curled up as best he could, and did his utmost to go to sleep.

He hoped to put the whole incident out of his mind, the affair of the mouse, the door and the scary alien world outside the flat, where he had been so disoriented and lonesome, even if only for a few seconds.

Those had been the longest moments of Fatticus’s life.

Caroline, meanwhile, was convinced that she had finally lost her senses. She concluded that it might indeed be wise to obtain a good night’s sleep; she followed her cat to bed. In the morning, she would seek professional advice regarding her obvious malaise.

A rather sinister man, who had been investigating the circumstances surrounding two strange phrases that he had discovered in a children’s periodical, at the conclusions to a pair of tales then returned to his base of operations, to report the startling particulars of the peculiar incident that he had just witnessed in the hall, outside the front door of Caroline Hawthorn’s flat.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A NOVEL ROMANCE

“A novel is a literary jigsaw puzzle, pieces of words constructed into a rudimentary picture, whose resolution is then refined, through careful editing, and thoughtful re-writing.”

- CAROLINE HAWTHORN.

THE MELODIC SOUNDS OF A PIANO drifted from the small, but comfortable home in one of the better parts of London as Caroline Hawthorn played her instrument, exercising the full range of her emotion, and demonstrating the depth of her well-rounded technique.

No sane person could claim, by the music being fashioned within the residence, to be irritated; no reasonable individual could deny the sheer beauty of the sounds that Caroline produced. She performed compositions by the old masters with such elegance that had they have heard her, they would have applauded, appreciatively.

Popular music also made an appearance in Caroline's repertoire. The rhythmic harmony of marches, the festive melodies of polka, and even the taboo syncopations of American ragtime were all quite familiar to the young woman. She presented them with all of the energy and enthusiasm that the works commanded; her great enjoyment of them was made obvious by her lively performance.

Of his daughter's proficiency on the instrument, her father would have been quite proud; she had quite clearly become a master of it, and could perform any composition that she wished in whatever manner that she desired. The piano merely served as an extension of her body, but provided for the expression of her soul.

It was spring, and she was in love; a young woman could ask for nothing further. Caroline had a wonderful husband, a beautiful house and her precious upright piano, the instrument that her father had gifted to her at Christmastime many years before. The keyboard, with its inexpensive action, could be temperamental at times and tended, when it was moved, to require repair; however, Caroline was not concerned with such triviality. It was much loved, and would not willingly be replaced; that she would never dispose of her most valued possession, she was quite firm in her resolve.

It was a part of Caroline, and she felt that she would remain with the piano, and its thin maple veneer, for the rest of her life.

Her husband also fell into such an exclusive category. Francis enjoyed a great deal hearing Caroline play the piano. He would sit in his armchair beside the instrument, in the parlour after dinner; while he read the evening post, he hummed along to the marches, sung to the polkas and marked the time, by swinging his fingers back and forth, of the rhythmic melodies.

Later, she would accompany him, as he played tender pieces on his violin; his striking recitals frequently brought them both to tears. The couple would spend their evenings attending fantastic parties of two; no other guests were invited, the proceedings having all those required already present.

Francis's career gave him the liberty to spend a great deal of time at home; the study functioned as his 'office away from the firm,' and allowed him the luxury of spending more time with his precious Caroline. He had the ability to see her, should either of them desire it, in mere moments. During the days, he would work on his latest engineering project; she would tend to domestic matters. In the afternoon, she would see to the cooking while he would care for the garden.

Their life was a peaceful and happy routine, with each part striving to make the best of the whole; the Hawthorn's felt confident they truly had the perfect marriage.

Caroline had completed her adolescent novel, the one that she had been toiling upon for so many years in which the Heroine had never found her beloved Hero. She had finished it in secret soon after she was wed to Francis; the bride had then hidden it away, considering the affair concluded, and no further indulgence in the medium to be necessary. The recent Missus Hawthorn had the idyllic life that she always wanted; all there was to do was enjoy it.

In the notion that she could thrive on her love for Francis forever, she had held great confidence; menial tasks contained a new sense of fulfilment, and the young woman never grew tired of living a simple household routine of slumber, meals and chores. Quite sadly, Caroline, in truth, had been mistaken;

she soon began to grow restless, and reconsider the neat simplicity of her formerly ideal lifestyle. She played her piano, and that was a brilliant pursuit but she found that she craved more.

Her father had been accurate in his assessment that his daughter would desire greater achievements. She quickly longed to make her own name, and not just trade on that of her husband. Caroline Hawthorn wished to be her own woman, an equal partner in her marital relationship, and not a dependent reliant upon her husband for all things. Caroline required an interest that would not only foster her self-worth, but also make her name known to society.

Francis offered his full, loving support, only wishing for her happiness. The question merely became of what Caroline would strive to be, and what she would work to accomplish. Unfortunately, the young woman had no immediate answer to such a query. Caroline considered briefly making a career of the piano, writing popular songs about summer days, and blue birds in love, but her melodies were uninspired and her lyrics full of cliché, with no style of her own. The music publishers to whom she offered her compositions harshly, and cruelly rejected them; there seemed to be no constructive future in such profitless activities.

Painting became her next endeavour; her work was pleasing but yet again uninspiring, technically correct but blasé with no significance aside from its colourful aesthetic sighted in her work. She took up sculpting and then pottery; without much success, the attempts at finding her niche continued. Caroline was determined to discover some means by which she could benefit society, a creative method of expressing herself to the world in particular; she just seemed hopelessly unable to identify what form this contribution would take.

Sadly, the frustrated young woman was rapidly running out of pursuits with which to try her hand.

One day, whilst searching for some misplaced documents of his own, Francis came across Caroline's romance novel, the manuscript that she had written in many stages during her young-adulthood. Valuing the significance of his unique find, he sat quietly in the upstairs bedroom and perused the tome; lest he expose his knowingly clandestine activity, he carefully stifled any vocal reaction to the narrative.

The man learned of the juvenile Caroline's callous attitudes on society, of her belief that love was merely an illusion, and of how she could merely look forward to a husband who would not treat her poorly. Francis read forlornly of the knight on a white horse that never arrived, whom the Heroine ultimately became quite certain did not exist.

Caroline's self-inspired Heroine suffered through a disappointing series of courting failures, until she had finally resigned herself to the idea of a marriage of convenience, an arrangement of necessity with the first man that she found tolerable enough with whom to consent spending the remainder of her life.

The poor lovelorn character was preparing to accept a proposal from a scarcely adequate suitor, when her Hero, at long last, made his appearance; the object of her affection swept the Heroine away, to her rightful place by his side. The blissful couple remained then together forever, in the timeless embrace of their love.

A tear came to Francis's eye, and he smiled; the thinly veiled declaration of her affection for him filled his own heart with great joy. He resolved to confront her with the manuscript, and urge her to resume her writings. Her husband felt that this was his wife's true calling; her purpose was to give people hope, and bless them with the beautiful accounts of love that, with ink and paper, only Caroline could convey.

As far as he was concerned, to deny the world of her words would be to deprive humanity of a great work of art, to rob it of a literary Monet, or Picasso. It would be as if a great symphony remained unperformed, trapped only in the composers mind to never be experienced by an audience; such a travesty could not stand.

He tried to reason with his wife, but Caroline was embarrassed by his discovery and angry at his rude intrusion upon her privacy. She failed to see any merit in what she generally considered to be a transgression against the literary world, the hideous manuscript that she was ashamed to have written. He argued with her, tried to persuade her that her rough narrative held great promise, and that she had the potential to be the next Jane Austen, the next great romance novelist.

Francis tried to express to her the passion that he had felt in her words, the emotion the pages had evoked in him; regardless, she cast off his thoughts as lover's exaggerations, the woman certain that his marital bias was clouding his judgment.

Her husband proposed bringing a third party into the debate, a neutral entity who could accurately gauge the merits, or lack thereof, contained within Caroline's writings. She refused; her rancid offering, the woman stated firmly, was unfit for human consumption. There would be no further discussion on the matter, period. Francis appeared defeated; he would be forced to honour his wife's wishes, abandon the subject entirely and destroy the offending manuscript, as she had demanded that he do.

It seemed that he had no other choice. Still, he had then considered the finer points of his position.

A devoted lover must always do their utmost to respect the wishes of their mate; it is vital that each member of the couple strive to uphold the bond of trust that exists between them. It is also imperative that partners are able to rely upon each other to act for their wellbeing, and that each makes a committed effort to accomplish whatever their spouse requires of them. However, there are occasions upon which these two ideals are not necessarily equivalent; what a husband asks of their wife, or vice-versa, may not be in their best interest. It then becomes the responsibility of their companion to choose the correct course of action.

If there is sufficient dedication between the two, their relationship will survive the initially perceived disloyalty; the offended partner will recognize the strength that it took for the other to act against their wishes. The courage required for their lover to risk their own contentment, in order to proceed in a manner that they felt would prove of greater benefit to their beloved will be appreciated.

Francis decided that he was prepared to take such a risk, and place himself in a position of possible jeopardy for the benefit of Caroline's future happiness. His only prayer was that his wife would be capable of perceiving his noble intent.

Francis placed the manuscript, with no amendment or modification, into the post; he addressed it to an editor with whom he had served in the war, and requested a realistic opinion regarding Caroline's potential. The reply, so as not to arouse his wife's suspicions, was to be directed to his office in the city. If his acquaintance thought that there was indeed no positive outlook for Caroline's literary career, then Francis would never broach the subject to her again, and it would be left to the past with no part in their future.

If, on the other hand, his former colleague felt that he would entertain further business with Missus Hawthorn, he would then present Caroline with the editor's professional opinion, to do with as she wished.

Weeks passed, with no reply to his query. Francis began to consider that perhaps the tome had gone astray in the mail service or, at the publishing house, been neglected. Caroline, having no further pursuits to evaluate, became rather despondent; none of her endeavours had proved fruitful enough with which to fashion a career. She was still generally satisfied with her home, her piano and her husband, but Francis could see that the lovely twinkle, contained within the radiance of her spirit, was faltering. This troubled him greatly; he speculated upon the fate of her precious literary work and, for choosing to trust the document to the English postal service, berated himself severely.

It was three months before a parcel finally arrived at his office; Caroline's manuscript and a letter, opening with profuse apologies from his associate, the delay the result of the man having been on sabbatical touring the Holy Land, contained within. The editor had found Caroline's work to be coarse, but had concluded that he could envision in a more refined product some marketable value; he wished to see, when such became available, a modern revision. Francis was thrilled; however, his enthusiasm was tempered by the prospect of the probable fury that, when Caroline learned of his covert activities, he would face.

Francis sensibly decided to allow his wife to learn of his efforts, and the opinions of his editorial acquaintance, while he was not present. He chose a day on which he was required to go into the city to place both the letter and her narrative in a location that Caroline was certain to find them, then ventured into London, his faith firmly invested in the notion that when he returned he would continue to have both wife, and home.

His companion quickly discovered the correspondence, on the music stand of her piano where Francis had carefully positioned it. The woman had been exceedingly angered, initially. Francis had shown great wisdom to elect not to relate the evaluation to her in person, lest she carry out a deed that she later would profoundly regret. Happily, she loved him dearly, soon empathizing with his motives and forgiving him; her silent rage turned to peaceful meditation, the woman quietly contemplating the development for minutes, an hour and then two.

Caroline perused her adolescent tirade, scoffing at her infantile scrawling, revising and editing, whilst she read it, the terrible prose. As she progressed, a clearer picture began to emerge of what an amended offering might resemble; sadly, she was not fond of it. She soon, in annoyance, tossed the notebook across the room; the whole affair was nothing but one of foolishness. Any further consideration would only serve to waste her time.

Again, her emotional boil shortly reduced to a simmer, and then cooled with Caroline once more revisiting the proposal. Throughout the rainy afternoon, her mood swung, from frustrated anger to the joy of inspiration; the pendulum eventually remained still, at a point roughly between but slightly towards the latter.

Her decision was made.

Nightfall approached, and she awaited the return of her beloved Francis, to inform him of her verdict and reward his efforts with a kiss; she would also admonish him, and advise her insubordinate husband that any further such treachery might prove fatal. She would have need of a typewriter; all modern authors employed the apparatus. Caroline would request that Francis purchase one for her.

It eventuated that there was to be no need for such a petition; when her husband appeared in the doorway, he cradled a typewriter in his arms. His intuition proved to be quite accurate.

Her novel was to be repeatedly revised, and polished from a rough stone into a gem, becoming Caroline Hawthorn's first published work. The narrative, entitled 'The White Horse,' had since been followed by several further tales; the accomplished author presently sat in front of her seasoned typewriter, the same one that Francis had returned home with ten years before, and prepared to embark upon a new adventure.

It would likely be another vigorous account of love and loss, passion and prestige, high society and low individuals, but with a sense of flair that only she could provide; her settings and characters were of a complexity and colour matched by no other writer.

As a result, Caroline's books had traded quite well; her publisher eagerly printed all the prose that she could provide. The stories came easily to Missus Hawthorn, flying from her fingers as if her digits were directly connected to her inspiration; the anecdotes and dialogue appeared on paper as if the events were unfolding around the author, and she was merely recording them for posterity.

Her prolific facility for producing fresh material seemed as if it would never diminish. Caroline and Francis were truly happy; each of their achievements was held proudly by the other, the couple equally productive halves of an extremely lucrative whole. Their life together was strictly perfect in every way.

Then, one Christmas Eve Day, there was a knock at the door.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE MAJOR GENERAL AND THE SPY

“NO, ABSOLUTELY NOT.”

By the commander’s abrupt dismissal of his petition, the operative was utterly flabbergasted. Indeed, it defied all logic; the case presented had been airtight and it had been a virtual certainty that his motion would be granted. The meeting with his superior was a mere formality. However, Major General Lewis Carlton, in his contrary retort, had been emphatic; his subordinate was consequently quite bewildered.

One could only interpret what the spy had witnessed within the hallway outside of Caroline Hawthorn’s flat in a single fashion. Disguised as a plumber, GT Ninety-Nine had chosen to take his surveillance of the widow to a more intimate level, and pay the woman a visit as his telephone calls had yielded, regarding the author’s clandestine activities, no useful information.

It was the operative’s duty to ensure that the military maintained its stranglehold held upon the cowed agent GT Twenty-Two; under no circumstances would their reluctant spy be permitted any contact with his wife, the woman would presumably remain under the false assumption that her husband was dead. As such, recent publications penned by the widow had caused GT Ninety-Nine great concern; the peculiar addendums following them were far too similar to agency communiqué’s for his liking.

The strange prose had made little sense however when decoded through the agency’s cryptographic system; they merely translated into equally confusing gibberish. “*A jar of purple tomatoes is larger than the seventh sacred elephant*” had approximated “a squadron of enemy dirigibles will overwhelm the seventh tank division.” In spite of this, there presently was no seventh tank division, and that there was no such enemy squadron of dirigibles was beyond doubt; such an impressive armament would never have eluded the eyes the greatest intelligence service in the world, and hence its existence was an impossibility.

"A grape rolls down hill like the cauliflower flies to the moon" was made out to be "a government will fall with the same speed at which its army will invade its neighbours." It was an eerie prediction, but no useful message could be obtained from it, at least not in the context of a wife endeavouring to contact her husband. Although the cryptographers had been thwarted in their efforts to construct anything coherent from the bizarre sentences, the operative was unconvinced; the assurances that they were rubbish failed to reconcile the ill feeling that had taken occupancy inside his stomach.

The agent had then elected to engage in further investigation.

There had been a cat there, a ginger-tabby. Was that not a significant enough indictment of the Hawthorn's subterfuge, the feline also possessed the striking blue-eyes unique only to those participants in the Feline Remote Intelligence Gathering Service. Further still, the animal appeared to pass through the front door of the residence whilst it was shut and, although not behaviour observed by any agency subject thus far, it was certainly not the typical conduct of an ordinary pussycat. That would qualify unquestionably as supernatural ability.

As far as the agent was concerned, no further evidence was required; Caroline Hawthorn must be promptly taken into custody and interrogated, lest the plot orchestrated by her and her husband be executed, and his valuable service to the organization be lost forever.

Apparently, this blatant confirmation of his suspicions was of insufficient worth to Lewis Carlton who, as if they were the ravings of a deranged lunatic, cast the observations of the operative aside. The General insisted that GT Ninety-Nine had misinterpreted what he had seen, that the transition accomplished by the feline had been a trick of the light and no such feat had actually taken place. Telepathic tabbies were at the limit of the aging officer's acceptance; he was not prepared to believe that any further capabilities in the animals were possible, surely not teleportation, and therefore the operative must have imagined such an outlandish event, if not even the cat itself.

These assertions, both unfair and untrue, served only to deepen the scowl that habitually graced the operative's face. The cat had quite clearly performed the act the agent had observed, his sharp faculties recording the plight of the stunned tabby while it emerged from the door as if it were a mist, and tumbled upon the floor of the hallway into a heap. The morbidly obese creature had then, with some effort, righted itself before pausing to stare curiously at the spy with its piercing blue eyes; first emitting an unusual blending of cough and sneeze, the animal then abruptly took to flight, hysterically begging its mistress with its terrible howls and frantic scratching for re-entry.

GT Ninety-Nine had wisely retreated then and, there having been no further need to expose himself to the widow Hawthorn, returned to the FRIGS facility some distance to the north of London, with all of the intelligence he required to submit his report obtained. Were he responsible for the organization, the woman would have been swiftly taken into agency custody; unfortunately, he was not, and the man who was in charge showed, even in the face of such compelling testimony as his operative had provided, an inexplicable reluctance to pursue such a course of action.

The agent restated his case once again, but to no further benefit.

The Major General expressed some concern that, would GT Twenty-Two become aware that his wife had been absconded with, the cooperation shown in the program by their most valuable agent would end in a most unfortunate manner. Indeed, the man was liable to apply his vast knowledge of the service to its severe detriment. In fact, a standing order was in place that under no circumstances would the organization take any action against Caroline, unwilling to face the potential repercussions that could be created by an angry rogue spy with such capabilities as those of the former Francis Hawthorn.

GT Ninety-Nine then insinuated that had he not been a former German agent, the Major General would have lent more credence to his statement. It appeared that his superior's distrust for the expatriate operative was clouding his judgment, the question of the agent's loyalty one that Carlton had obviously never resolved.

It was insulting.

The entire affair, from the beginning, had made the spy apprehensive; despite his numerous warnings and objections, the British army had insisted that, through his distasteful intimidation of their own captive officer, the German prove his new allegiance.

It had been his previous experience that such methods were given to failure, the subjects of which eventually turning to irrational desperation; his advice was tersely disregarded. GT Ninety-Nine was ordered to proceed with his superior's ill-considered strategy. His function within the organization would not be to serve as a tabby-equipped field operative, but rather to ensure the ongoing collaboration of the man that he would threaten into such service.

As far as Major General Carlton was concerned, no evidence had been presented that sufficiently implicated Caroline Hawthorn in any clandestine activities against the service; there was no proof that she had either knowledge of the program, or an awareness of her husband's continued existence. By his own admission, the woman had seemed genuinely confused by the agent's telephone calls and, with no definitive translations of her strange footnotes, the General

declared the riddles moot; they were not adequate in and of themselves to conclude that the writer had a familiarity with the program's secret code.

Regarding the ginger-tabby, the General made a thinly veiled suggestion, to which GT Ninety-Nine took great offence, that the agent undergo a medical examination. His inferred argument, that the animal did not exist, was a complete mockery. The operative certainly did not imagine the hulking mass of a feline, nor could he ever invent such a grotesque sight; the almost comical appearance was likely one that would make frequent recurrence in his slumber for some time to come.

The spy was doubtful that even photography could sway the officer to see his position; Carlton, for failing to demonstrate the colour of the creature, would likely dismiss the monochromatic images.

GT Ninety-Nine speculated that even if he conclusively proved both the existence, and the configuration of Caroline Hawthorn's cat, the General would then propose that its presence in the flat was pure chance; the blue-eyed ginger-tabby, the officer would say, was merely the result of natural selection and, as such, there was of conspiracy still no evidence. He resigned himself to the notion that any further efforts to convince his superior had no purpose.

One would be mistaken to think that, for the man he had blackmailed, GT Ninety-Nine held neither sympathy, nor empathy for the wife whose husband he had denied her, for his situation was no different; his native country had persuaded him to serve in a similar fashion, and it had only led to his betrayal. Nonetheless, his greater responsibility was to the nation that, from his oppressors, had liberated him and, that the pair was scheming against it, he was firmly convinced.

It was his duty to ensure that the cryptic sentences were not an effort by the author to reply to the queries of her estranged husband, and rather a mere device, employed by the writer to inspire intrigue in her adolescent audience. Unable to reconcile himself easily to such a neat and tidy answer, he had opted to engage in direct observation of the woman; he took up residence in a flat near Caroline's building, from which he could closely monitor her behaviour.

His major hindrance had then simply been that Caroline Hawthorn hardly ever left her home.

The scant few hours each week the woman actually vacated her premises, a housekeeper was present; the operative had therefore been unable to gain entry, and mount a search for any incriminating evidence. The continuous vigil inside the apartment baffled the agent, and he was incapable of discerning the need for it; nevertheless, and regardless of the reason for them, those odd

circumstances had completely frustrated his desire for an intimate but inconspicuous inventory of the contents of said flat.

The more discreet methods of intelligence gathering having been eliminated, he had decided to then, in an effort to straightforwardly establish her guilt, engage the woman by telephone and gauge, to his own cryptic queries, her responses; however, although visibly shaken, the reactions of the author were inconclusive. GT Ninety-Nine, unable to determine if the woman had been disturbed by the contents of his communication, or the unexpected intrusion imposed by his inquiry, had come no further in his investigation.

It appeared that the only course of action remaining to him was to overtly enter the flat and, through direct scrutiny, uncover the truth. If this meant subduing the woman, or even interrogating her in her own home, then so be it. The situation could no longer be permitted to proceed with its mysteries unanswered. He disguised himself as a plumber; his intention was to imply that there was water entering the flat below from above, and demand entry into the Hawthorn residence to determine the source of the fictional flooding.

Of course, it had never come to that; the obvious evidence of subterfuge had chosen to conveniently present itself, without his ever needing to set foot inside the apartment, to the agent.

Unfortunately, as he had later discovered, his superior was not as easily persuaded by the presence of project property on the Hawthorn premises as he was. Lewis Carlton was to celebrate his eightieth birthday that year; the ancient relic was set to finally retire from his position, and leave the military. As far as GT Ninety-Nine was concerned, that could not happen a moment too soon. The old fool appeared to be lulled into a false sense of complacency, and was unwilling to consider that there could be any potential disturbance to the harmony of his agency; his affinity for GT Twenty-Two was also made painfully obvious by this most recent display of feigned ignorance.

GT Ninety-Nine could no longer permit the General such an indulgence; the security of the organization was at grave risk, and it could soon face the utter catastrophe that a rogue agent would present. It appeared as if it would be left solely to him to prevent it; he ceased his arguments, and then smiled thinly as he allowed his superior to rationalize their dismissal. Carlton subsequently berated his apparent perceptual failings, while he nodded curtly; following all of that, the agent had departed swiftly from the office of his superior. His task was then to determine his next move; whatever that would be, the act would require no further approvals than those of his own convictions.

The expatriate German, come British intelligence operative would not see the project that he had worked so hard to maintain, at the behest of such incompetence, come apart; to ensure its continued survival, even if this meant

disregarding his orders and employing his own measures, he would take matters into his own, more capable hands.

Major General Lewis Carlton, meanwhile, had the unsettling notion that his operative was indeed likely to be given to discard his instructions, and engage in his own arbitrary activities. He scrawled a few poignant notes upon a piece of lined foolscap and, before he left for the day, placed it in the top drawer of his desk.

His hope was that there would be no need for them, but his intuition suggested otherwise.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A FRIEND IN NEED

FATTICUS TRIED TO SLEEP; he desperately wished, in order to avoid thoughts of his recent escapade through the front door, and out into the terrible world beyond, to lose consciousness. Exhausted by his ordeal he soon mercifully nodded off and, closely thereafter, began to dream.

It was raining.

Beneath the sheet of wrought iron, under which he was serving out his final days the old dog in the alley, as he struggled to find some comfort on the cold, concrete laneway sighed, sadly. The arthritis, in his paws and his legs, did absolutely nothing for his demeanour; it made his life quite painful. The not that large, but not too small, mostly-Doberman and some German Shepherd, with a dash of ten different other breeds of canine was not, by nature, an angry dog; however, that he was very quickly and easily exasperated was ensured by the hurt and grief his own body suffered upon him.

By the cat, he was particularly incensed. He was not provoked by just any feline, but one terrible little creature in particular; a cocky British tabby had found it amusing to spend his time taunting the unfortunate old dog. The nuisance would drive him into such a rage that the tired canine would be prompted into, down the alley, taking chase. Never able to seize the young rascal, it would serve to achieve nothing other than to place further strain upon his aged muscles; the dog was rewarded only with a little more pain, his supply of which was already held in great abundance.

There was absolutely no sport in the exercise; it appeared that the feline, just barely more than a kitten, was being cruel to the decrepit canine just for the sake of it. However, as far as the dog was concerned the cat, for his juvenile behaviour, could be forgiven. That was, he would grant the animated annoyance a modicum of lenience.

Of course, were the dog actually capable of capturing the scoundrel, he would not be adverse to teaching the little ruffian a lesson, and attempt to scare some sense into the inconsiderate hooligan. The weary beast, cheered with that thought, had laid his head down between his paws, on the frigid, unforgiving cement; he elected to then dream, fantasize of the day on which he would finally catch the insolent cat, and delight in the images of justice obtained by frightening the arrogance right out of the furry little devil.

The musings slightly improved upon his mood, and he chortled quietly or, at least, did whatever dogs do to express their mirth while he happily drifted off to the pleasures of sleep; the rhythm of the rain falling on his wrought iron roof encouraged an easy transition to his intoxicating slumber.

He dreamt of a wonderful world, in which he was a youthful, stronger dog with no cursed arthritis to inhibit his movement, or cause him his accustomed anguish. The canine was king of this realm; he would chase all number of cats down the many garden paths and then, while his warm breath caressed the nape of their tender necks, laugh as well as a canine could with his powerful jaws mere inches away from their lethal embrace. Rather than sponsoring their end by such means, the beast would allow the horrified little creatures to escape and roam free, for another day on which he would feign, once more, to hunt them.

The dog would never intend harm upon a cat, for he had long ago befriended one such feline; he had served as its defender and protector. The canine had loved that creature very much, and he could never hurt, not if he had any choice in the matter, another of its kind.

However, the brash, young tabby had a talent to incite him into such a great rage that, should he succeed in trapping his eternal infuriation, the dog was deathly afraid he one day would unwittingly inflict some rather serious injuries upon the cat; that would indeed be quite unfortunate. The dog wished so desperately for the juvenile cat to see, in order that it could for a mere instant experience the tremendous suffering that the pitiable canine was forced to endure; then it would know what cruel torment the naughty feline, in the pursuit of his childish pastime, was promoting.

He was certain that it would cease such activities then; the enlightened little cat would stop the taunting, and the canine would be left to his own devices. The dog would be free to while away his twilight days in slumber, and dream of a world in which he was in no pain, where he would

run, chase and very nearly capture his imaginary herd of cats, but always let them loose again.

An odd sound, one not quite a howl, nor a meow but some combination thereof, a strange, unearthly noise between the two had roused the dog from his peaceful, pain-free slumber; the agony of reality wasted no time in its reassertion, with his various ailments each declaring themselves patently to the old dog's addled mind. He slowly lifted his eyelids, an effort to groggily observe just what machination of Hades had wrested him so spitefully from his magnificent paradise only to see, mere inches away from his nose a rain-soaked tabby, the same that had so faithfully served as the bane of his existence, challenge him to a contest.

If it were not for the excruciating pain, the dog would likely have opted to ignore the menace and revisit his dreamland; unfortunately, his partially conscious canine psyche had already associated his returning anguish with the provocative mass of wet fur that cockily stood before him. His instinctual mind sought swift revenge for the tribulation the foul creature had imposed upon him and, before his higher reasoning had the opportunity to object, the aggravated animal was prodded to act.

As had happened so many times before the dog, with all of the might that his weary, worn carcass could assemble, leapt to his feet; he then dashed after the fleeing feline down the rain-sodden alley. The frustrated old beast proclaimed his rage by barking behind his prey in anger; his screams described in exacting detail the horrors that, should the beleaguered canine finally succeed upon wrapping his gigantic teeth around the tiny irksome feline's delicate torso, he would set loose upon the depraved vermin.

The cat paid absolutely no heed to his threats; the tabby instead made light of the pursuit and, through the repeatedly demonstrated helplessness of the crippled canine, obtained vast delight. The huge, feral killer was constantly eluded by the adorable, little house-pet; of the tale, the entertainment value never seemed to diminish, with applause always following the revelation that the brave cat had once again bested the ferocious dog.

Reaching the end of the dripping wet alley, the bouncy feline made a graceful leap up onto a decaying crate, then jumped to one atop that; all the exhausted old dog could do was lunge at it weakly, and growl despairingly. His well-worn paws, with each subsequent, fruitless effort became slightly more dilapidated

As had happened on far too many prior occasions, devastating fatigue would soon overwhelm the dog, and he would be incapable of persisting; his rage would subside, and the impossible hunt would be abandoned, the canine making his despondent return to his place under the piece of wrought iron. He would curl up on the rigid floor of concrete, curse the fiend that had tormented him, yet again, and fall back into his slumber, to dream of a land in which he felt no pain, a paradise where he eternally chased cats, and chose to set them free.

He had lived in a human house once; the dog had shared residence with a cat, one to whom he had become a great and loyal friend. The feline had adored him very much; she would curl up against his sleeping belly and purr, her expression of appreciation for the protection, comfort and warmth her canine companion had cheerfully offered. He was equally contented by the camaraderie she provided. The two comprised an illustrious pair; her superior mental faculties, and his exceptional brawn, made short work of any adversities that in their exploits they would face within the harsh urban landscape that lay beyond their sheltered home.

Together, they would see to the old woman with whom they shared their abode; they would watch over her when she fell ill and, in her increasing pain, provide comfort. One day, after many joyful years together, their mistress had failed to rouse; soon their dwelling was invaded by men who spirited her away. They imprisoned, and then removed his friend the cat, and condemned him to the cruelty of the world outside; too old to be wanted by anyone else, he was destined to conclude his life by simply fending for himself.

The dog suffered such unimaginable loneliness. He longed to be with his friend so very much; she would provide, for his incalculable misery, immeasurable comfort. He had learned mortality that day; he had seen the death of the human, and soon he himself begged for it. However, all the canine could do was, by foraging for scraps in the alley and sleeping as much as he could, patiently pass the days. He dreamt of better places, happier times and waited for the end that he knew would eventually come, blissfully relieving him of his miserable life.

His tormentor, the tabby cat, had provided the only disruption to his tedious existence; it created the only chaotic component in his daily routine. Everything else ran 'like clockwork,' even the weather. He wished for the unwelcome interloper to keep his distance, and allow the unwanted, forlorn canine, while some measure of his dignity remained to modestly fade away. That it persisted in such a cruel diversion by rousing the dog on countless occasions from his serenity, and thwarting the efforts of the

miserable animal to succumb to the crushing weight of reality, was the greatest disgrace that any one, or thing could ever suffer upon him, the dishonourable act of keeping him alive.

Night marched into the sky, and the old dog made his daily forage for food; he found a meal in discarded human rubbish, and then he slept again, this time generally undisturbed. A faint barking soon from the distance emerged; a youthful dog proudly trumpeted the pursuit of his prey, but the dozing canine endeavoured to disregard the noise and shut the door upon the disturbances of the world. He fought to remain within the solitude of his dreams, and steel himself inside the mental box in which he hid, the place where his pain kept itself at bay while he frolicked in the sun-drenched garden, and bit at butterflies in the tall, green grass.

The unsolicited barking chose to move closer and, as the old dog became furious at the sustained assault upon his precious hours of respite, became louder still. The unrelenting commotion increased in intensity, and focussed in upon the alley until the prey in question was observed fleeing desperately past his hovel under the sheet of wrought iron. It was a familiar quarry, the same creature that he had chased on such numerous occasions as to prove difficult the recollection of memories from a time before.

The arrogant, obnoxious, irritating, annoying, frustrating, insolent ruffian of a tabby cat staggered wearily to the end of the alley; his fur, saturated with water having undergone the prolonged pursuit of an immense brute of a monster, was matted and soiled. The feline was granted neither the luxury of the time, nor the strength required to leap up and escape his aggressor; exhausted, the creature had been left without any means with which to dash to safety upon the crates.

His only remaining, although ill-advised course of action was to turn and face his opponent; the tabby cat would hiss, growl, and make as much of his small size as nature would permit. In turn, his attacker moved to assess the strengths, of which there were few, and many weaknesses of the profoundly disadvantaged feline; his heartless mind worked to determine the optimum method of dispatching his prey, while keeping the risk of personal injury, by way of the creature's razor sharp claws, to a minimum.

The beast, while he persisted to snarl his incessant threats of egregious bodily harm towards the doomed animal unwillingly sequestered in front of him, evaluated his many options carefully. However, it was plain to all parties, both involved and in witness that, regardless of the method, the dog intended to shortly execute the cat.

This list included the quietly observing, elderly canine that remained in obscurity beneath his makeshift shelter of wrought iron. His recollections temporarily drifted away from the macabre scene before him, and made a return to the days in which he resided, with the cat and the old woman, in their pleasant, cheery home. The old dog thought of the companionship that, with the feline, he had found, remembered his promise to protect her at any cost and reminisced, about the love and affection she showed in exchange to him.

He knew that she would have wanted him to protect the forlorn cat presently trapped at the head of the alley, and that it would have hurt her quite deeply to know that her great protector had chosen instead to, while one of her kind was mercilessly dispatched by such a cruel monster, lie still and do nothing. It would be seen a grave betrayal, this blatant abandonment of a 'fellow in need'; that it was one she would never forgive, the dog was well aware.

The sincere truth was that the tabby was indeed such a compatriot in distress; the two species, feline and canine, were united by their service to humanity. The old dog felt without question that they were equal; they ought never do harm to each other, work together when they were outcast and, when the other was in need, provide aid. They were two kindred spirits who should find joy together, and not act as the instrument of pain, or death to that who should be called friend, not for sport, amusement or, in particular, pleasure.

To take notice of the gruesome spectacle that was preparing to unfold in front of him made the old dog so very sad; he knew that the two animals could find great camaraderie with each other, and such shameful violence was nothing but a tragic waste of the love which the world had in short supply.

Unfortunately, the reality was there was precious little he could do about the situation.

It was a definite understatement to declare that he was a decrepit specimen of an aged mongrel; for the magnificent young predator that stood proudly before him, he would be, most certainly, no match. The annoying little tabby had undeniably taken on more water than he could bail, and his ship consequently would promptly sink; there was no reason, when it had demonstrated such a critical lack of judgment for the old dog that the cat had plagued for such a long time to come to the rescue of such a stupid creature.

In rebuttal, the smiling eyes of his old friend stared from his memories up at him, and his argument was decisively trounced; her loving, kind gaze emanated from deep within his own soul, and he whimpered quietly while he concluded that he was destined to disappoint her. The old dog no longer possessed within him the spirit required to confront the younger, stronger beast; his heart, as he was not certain he cared enough to combat his own cowardice, seemed to be incapable of facing such a task.

Upon the frightened creature, caught in the end of the alley, the monster of a dog slowly began his advance; this resulted in a dramatic increase in the pitch of the tabby's cries. The terrible siren sounded a harbinger of its own, inevitable demise. Meanwhile, the old dog struggled to hide from the memory of his friend, his shame, striving to become concealed from her heartbreaking, gaze.

It would be suicide to defend the cat and further, to save the life of the implement of his everlasting torment, a flight of utter madness. He did his utmost to defend his position, and make his case to the court that resided inside his own mind, but his petitions were futile. His friend was the judge, and she would never approve of his behaviour, nor would she ever, to his arguments, give credence.

After the events of the evening had concluded, he would have relegated himself to the status of wretched mongrel, with no morals left to him and no friends, even in memory. With the demise of the tabby, he would be free finally, to fade away into the annals of meaningless history; the alley would serve as the last station on the track of a forgettable railway.

His worthless life would have been met with no lessons learned, and no actions of note taken; the dog was to be remembered by no one. He would have his much-desired, silent finale; his mortal decline would be hampered by the selfish actions of the intrusive entity cowering in horror at the wrong end of the alley no longer.

Ironically, if it were not for that cat, he would not have even been present to witness its execution. The simple fact was that the daily turmoil incited by the imprudent feline was the only reason he had failed to slip away from the tenuous embrace of life. Without it, his wish to join the chronicles of obscurity would have long since been granted.

The thoughts of the old dog returned to that of his one true friend from so long ago and, basking in her loving smile, he came to understand that the increased longevity inspired by the cat was not endowed upon him merely so that he could be present at its demise. Rather, it appeared gifted

to permit him the opportunity to rescue his only companion in recent memory, the tabby that had so dutifully kept his spirit alive.

It would be remiss of an old dog to doubt the profoundness of such a purpose. All of his muscles, bones and associated cartilage protested the abuse he, through the mere act of standing up, chose to inflict upon them; then, he emerged from his safety beneath his wrought iron roof. He barked his challenge to the monster of the dog before him and, despite the foolishness such an act of charity would entail, announced his intention to defend the tabby cat.

In stunned silence, the younger animal stood in complete disbelief of what his ears had heard, and failed to find any comprehension of the motives displayed by this elderly third party who had seemingly appeared from nowhere. He could only conclude that this antique example of the canine species must have lost his mind; the actions of the old dog that had chosen willingly to intrude upon his execution of the tabby cat made, to the modern adolescent, little if any sense.

Pausing his grisly activities, the youngster anxiously inquired as to the nature of the relationship between the tabby cat and the old dog, and why, in particular the elderly canine, to merely postpone the insignificant creature's demise, would place his own life at risk.

A sigh preceded the only answer that the old dog could provide, and he then stated the truth; the tabby cat was his only friend. The great beast laughed at him of course or, at the very least engaged in whatever method canine's employed to express mirth; then he turned, the pitiful relic disregarded as a threat to his massive superiority, to resume his decided method of annihilation toward his hapless quarry.

Lunging towards the tabby in a murderous assault, the monster initiated his attack, intent on crushing the life with his massive jaw from the unfortunate animal. The fearful, but solemn feline prepared himself for his looming, painful demise, resigned to the woeful anti-fortune that he evidently faced. Of the old dog's intervention, the cat had been appreciative. Surprised by the aid of the canine that he had, as part of his daily routine, teased into combat ruthlessly, although unable to spare him his fate, he would be proud to consider the dog, for as short a period as that may be, his friend.

The old dog would soon prove that friendship in a remarkably theatrical fashion. A cry leapt out of the predator's muzzle, and the monster slowly turned around to face his new quarry, the old dog that had deigned to bite him, unceremoniously, upon his hindquarter.

He had previously held no malice towards his elder, but the frail fool had since succeeded in placing himself upon the wrong side of his sensibilities. The event was of little significance; the youthful fighter would have no qualms about assisting the old dogs aspirations to leave this world behind.

The matter of the cat would conclude soon after.

The old dog fought with a renewed strength of heart; he battled for the memory of his old friend, the canine striving to maintain his honour. He went toe-to-toe with the younger, stronger animal and dedicated his remaining physical assets to campaign emphatically against the needless death of his latest associate, the tabby cat.

His adversary was taken aback by the ferocity the old dog showed, and the sheer intensity of determination the smaller dog brought to the scuffle. There were injuries sustained by both sides, and the beast eventually elected to withdraw, daunted by his elder's continued display of stamina; his opponent was mortally wounded, but still insisted to fight.

He would dispose of the cat another day but, for now, he would respect his elder, and leave the noble old dog to die in peace, with the dignity that he deserved.

The old dog permitted his adversary to go, and then collapsed victoriously upon the concrete in the alley; his task to save his new friend had been successful. Pleased with what he had accomplished, his companion of long ago smiled at him from her place in his mind and, as the tabby licked at his face, the cat purred a song of gratitude, and love. He chose, then to curl up against the abdomen of his mortally wounded comrade in affection, and did his best to comfort his dying saviour.

The canine had fulfilled his purpose; he had persuaded the world to spare the life of the little tabby cat, in return for the sacrifice of his. He would die with the knowledge that his existence had meaning, and depart his life with the comforting notion that his old friend would have been so very proud of him. The dog would pass on in the company of newfound camaraderie, of a cat who held, for the one who had rescued him, resounding respect and admiration.

With satisfaction and great joy, the dog then died there, in the alley. He did not fade away slowly under a piece of wrought iron alone, but rather left quickly, at the glorious conclusion of a righteous war in the defence of a friend, one who would miss his brave old acquaintance quite dearly.

Caroline woke up, and recounted the story on her typewriter; then, she cried for the heroic dog that had seen fit to stand up for what he had believed and, in the aid of a friend, give his life.

After her tears had dried, she typed one final, quizzical line.

Pickles bounce over the table to the drum of the strawberry flower.

The author was quite certain that there was no one on Earth who knew what that meant.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE TELEPHONE CALL

IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT. As terrible of a cliché as that statement may be, of that frightful evening there is no description that could prove more accurate. A frigid gale had roared with such intensity that even the moon declined to present its gleaming countenance. The direction of the heavy rains and harsh winds changed incessantly; not even the briefest moment of respite was provided to any poor soul who had been forced to endure them. There had been experienced in the townspeople's memory no less hospitable conditions.

For emphasis, this narrator would wish to reiterate once more that it was a nasty, terrible and dreadfully despicable evening, upon which sensible inhabitants would huddle in their homes, and pray for Mother Nature to spare them from any severe harm; the streets were left barren of any but the bravest or most foolish of travellers. It was conversely the perfect night for a spy.

The weather conditions were ideal to permit one to steal into a top-secret military facility and, whilst guards, soldiers and police all elected to remain dry by distancing themselves from the unbridled fury of the storm, pilfer scientific data, formulas and theories. In the small, unassuming flat occupied by both her and the kindly groundskeeper known secretly by the austere designation of GT Twenty-Two, the ginger-tabby Cleopawtra did as she had been trained and, while the tempest raged outside stood silent watch in a compartment hidden beneath the base of the kitchen cupboard over carefully arranged plans and maps.

GT Twenty-Two was hoping that the miserable evening would provide the opportunity with which to conclude his most-recent assignment he sought. Directed to gain entrance to a German facility suspected of conducting clandestine research, the spy was to determine just what precisely the scientists were studying. Several months before, the unassuming man and his curious cat had discreetly taken up residence in the small, Bavarian town; the agent had then painstakingly constructed a credible persona with which, were any subterfuge discovered, to deflect any suspicions that might consequently arise.

The good-natured, middle-aged man currently known as Frederic Stutt obtained, at the facility purportedly devoted to horticulture, a rather limited position; his task was to manage the more cosmetic grounds of the complex. He had since cultivated a substantial familiarity with the layout of the site, its visible operations, personnel and schedule.

It was thought by British Army Intelligence that a vast covert facility, its purpose as of yet unidentified, existed underneath the multitude of unassuming research buildings that populated the expansive site. The always-industrious Frederic located one of the engineers that had been responsible for the initial construction of the complex, and then gently persuaded the fellow to provide him, regarding the suspected underground installation, with further details.

The man had confirmed the allegations and, while under rigorous interrogation, provided the spy with the general locations of entrances to the cavernous chamber that existed beneath the immaculately landscaped facade.

Frederic would be required to place his faith entirely in the accuracy of the former engineer's memory; a fault in his recollection could cause a potentially lethal collapse of his enterprise. The spy, for weeks before the date of its execution, then meticulously planned the operation. The positions of aboveground buildings, with the provided locations of subterranean openings, were carefully correlated; both suitable points of entry and appropriate avenues of escape had been scrupulously ascertained.

There were other imperatives; first, his persona required an alibi, a means by which to absolve him from blame and second, the facility, to keep the risk of detection to a minimum, would need to be staffed with minimal personnel.

The fierce autumn storm had readily offered those conditions, providing an excellent opportunity for the operative to complete his mission. An evening itinerary was quickly fashioned; Frederic would appear at the complex soon after dusk under the pretence that he was required, lest the increasingly violent winds pull them from the rain-soaked soil, to stake and lash down the many young trees that were being cultivated throughout the site. No guards patrolled the grounds in such weather, and the scientists by then would have all retired to their comfortable homes, leaving him to undertake his own competent supervision.

As he tended to the trees, the gardener spy would move in a direction away from his intended target, then return undetected and, to the small structure that housed his chosen entrance to the facilities below, make his haste.

The relationship between the guards and affable gardener with the bushy moustache was friendly and cordial; they elected to stay in their tiny hut and beckon their trusted colleague Frederic through the barricades. The officers had no desire to expose themselves to the elements, and they were quite confident

that not even those with clandestine intentions would opt to venture out in such horrid weather. They light-heartedly informed their associate that it was, in security circles, a well-known fact that inclement conditions effectively deterred spies and therefore it was safe to conclude that there was no need to patrol an area for intruders when there were none to be had.

The men laughed as they asked Frederic in jest to inform them if he encountered anyone as foolish as him; the gardener, in silent enjoyment of the subtle irony that their humour unintentionally contained, had simply smiled and then nodded in a mock agreement of their droll request.

The raincoat clad man progressed into the grounds, and then set about his presumed task, steadying the unfortunate trees that were, compliments of the powerful gale, suffering such a brutal thrashing. Frederic served his botanical charges well; the spy always performed every one of his duties with the utmost pride, those both obvious and concealed. Over the preceding decade, he had laboured in several different kitchens, and Europe's finest chefs had taught him to prepare many extraordinary meals. GT Twenty-Two also found employ as a thin-moustached, snobby Parisian waiter, and had later served as the concierge for a posh hotel in Berlin. His private resume held additional entries denoting his time spent as a teller at a secretive Swiss bank, and his position as a Viennese locomotive engineer.

Never too high profile, his posts were selected to permit him a graceful exit; no notice was paid to the abrupt disappearance, several weeks following unsolved incidents of espionage, of the unremarkable man. Regarding his career choices, the primary concern was quite simply whether they allowed him sufficient standing to provide him with, to the information that he required, either straightforward or indirect access.

Regardless of how menial, GT Twenty-Two had applied his own high personal standard to each profession; as well, the experience he gained lent to his library of characters increased legitimacy.

The spy had become a true man of the world. He had learned many useful things but more importantly, he had known a number of extraordinary people who had schooled him, quite comprehensively, in the subject of human nature; this is, particularly for one involved in subterfuge, an important topic. Through his studies, Frederic became a professor of manipulation; that talent was further refined through his great capacity for empathy, and the understanding attained by living a dozen different lives.

Despite his imposed separation from his beloved Caroline, and the malice that he held towards his superiors, it would be a falsehood for GT Twenty-Two to state that he had not found his new way of life somewhat intriguing.

Nevertheless, the joy in life is found through long-term human companionship, and that was an indulgence the spy would be eternally denied.

Frederic staked the trees as quickly as possible, moving away from his intended destination while he worked to craft his alibi, one engineered to make it as simple as possible for investigators to remove the collectively appreciated gardener from suspicion. Once he came upon a large, old oak tree that stood at the property's edge, the man took pause; a high branch he had conveniently rendered subject to the whims of the weather had indeed fallen in the strong winds to the ground. The spy was satisfied in his ability to implement his planned deception of a feigned injury to the head; a tumble into the ravine beyond would then be staged that could, should a search for him be conducted, justify his extended absence.

After slashing his forehead open with a jagged rock, Frederic smeared his blood on the fallen branch; he then tossed himself haphazardly into the shallow gully, manufacturing evidence to corroborate his testimony by trampling bushes and grass as he fell.

Confident that he had staged a sufficient enough ruse with which to circumvent his being exposed, the secondary gardener then resumed his principal covert occupation. He made his return to the complex carefully, treading with the utmost deliberation whilst endeavouring to leave little sign that he had taken leave of the ravine in which, inadvertently, he had fallen unconscious.

Meanwhile, Cleopawtra, his loyal partner in crime remained focussed in the nook beneath the kitchen cupboard on the dimly lit documents laid before her. The feline's telepathic abilities readily provided Frederic with the facility to consult the diagram of the complex that, from his extensive research, he had produced or, in the event of an impromptu escape, check maps of the surrounding area.

The spy's bond with the feline appeared to have boundless range, for whether she was nearby, such as in the small flat barely a mile hence, or if she were a hundred times that distance from him, GT Twenty-Two had never failed to see as she saw. He would frequently use her eyes to recall documents that he was unable, for fear of detection, to carry with him, or ones that he could not entirely memorize.

However, a cursory inspection of the flat would yield neither cat, nor incriminating documents; that evening, before Frederic had departed on his mission, he had carefully removed the contents of the cupboard, mountains of cans and other heavy groceries and then, exposing a tiny compartment underneath, pulled away the planks that formed its base.

With great unease on the part of Frederic, he placed Cleopawtra into the opening after the documents; a modest quantity of food and water was left for her and, to illuminate the nook, a small battery-powered lamp, underneath one of the planks that were all subsequently re-seated, had been installed. He then replaced the contents of the cupboard, blowing dust upon them, and entombed the precariously positioned feline until his return.

She trusted that he would come back to her; the spy had always recovered the ginger-tabby, even though that effort occasionally resulted in a very narrow escape. While the pair had an excellent record of avoiding detection, not all of their endeavours had been unblemished; there were still instances in which they had been prompted to make a harried, but professional retreat.

Thoroughly erasing any evidence that would implicate the spy, and stifling any means by which the authorities could locate them any further, the two had appeared to vanish instantly. However, there had been a harrowing flight through perilous Parisian back-alleys, a complicated egress by way of the fetid sewers of Berlin and, with an Inspector in Vienna, a dramatic exchange of pistol-fire.

Both feline and human prayed that on this appalling evening no such escapade awaited them. Having earlier observed several high-ranking botanists regularly enter and later, from a trivial building in the heart of the grounds emerge, Frederic had identified it as the access point that he was most apt to breach. The spy had followed the route he had drafted upon the map that was referenced through his loyal feline's blue eyes and fortunately, no other souls were encountered as he made his journey to the structure undetected.

If he were noticed outside, his blood-soaked forehead and mud-stained clothes would have undoubtedly absolved him from suspicion, but the spy preferred to circumvent any potential conflict, no matter how minimal a threat such an encounter might pose, by avoiding any personal contact.

His privacy was soon confirmed; it had then been time to venture indoors. Frederic picked the door lock rather easily. He had learned the skill, amongst others, during his education at the facility of the Feline Remote Intelligence Gathering Service within which had been detained over ten years before. The dishevelled spy granted his own entry, but not before he cleverly placed small burlap sacks over his boots, and covered his hands with thin gloves so not as to betray his presence by soiling the interior of the structure.

The building was quite small, housing merely four rooms; a brief survey revealed that it held an office, two seemingly unused science laboratories and a staff meeting area. The spy held the notion that one of the secret entrances resided in the managerial corner of the structure and, optimistic that the concealed access would be easily revealed, he proceeded there directly.

The office was sparsely furnished; a desk, chair and a wardrobe were all that occupied the room. Even had the man he interrogated failed to provide him with the vague location of the entrance, the lack of a filing cabinet would have resoundingly aroused his suspicions. The wardrobe seemed a preposterously obvious place for a hidden passageway, and he was not to be denied the amusement obtained through revealing such inanity; the removal of its floorboards presented a crude concrete stairway, the construction of which similar to those commonly employed in household air-raid shelters.

Listening intently for any sign that there was a presence lurking below, Frederic crept down the stairway, and breached the underground catacombs.

Proved accurate in his suspicion that the storm would prompt the complete abandonment of the facility, he began his quiet and careful investigations. The spy examined dozens of laboratories, each seemingly dedicated to the development of a new strain of flora, the details of which were revealed by way of his methodical investigative skills, and then memorized to relay later to his central command in London.

GT Twenty-Two soon deduced that the German scientists were cultivating organic weapons; they had produced new types of hardy, quick growing grass that could rapidly choke the life from a wheat field, as well as blackberries that were, in a matter of weeks, capable of smothering acres of cropland, and required almost no moisture in order to do so.

These plants were would-be super-weeds, resistant to all but the most destructive means of elimination. Employment of such methods would likely result in the devastation of an enemy's crops, and the crippling of it's food production abilities. Frederic quickly grasped the terrible implications of these clandestine accomplishments, and he would alert, swiftly as he was able, his superiors to the threat.

Despite his personal feelings regarding the injustices that had been committed towards him, about how, by his own government the spy had been betrayed he, for the sake of his family and chiefly, his beloved Caroline, carried on with his duties. Truthfully, his only real concerns were those that involved her safety and happiness. As outrageous as it may have seemed on the surface, this evil German flora appeared to have the very real capacity of jeopardizing his wife's future wellbeing, and as such, they must be dealt with.

Unfortunately, Frederic must have inadvertently activated some unseen system of electronic surveillance. Moments after arriving at his conclusions, the heavy footfalls of security guards were heard echoing unexpectedly throughout the passages within the previously unoccupied research complex. The spy was then obliged to engineer an abrupt departure and, making efficient use of the map Cleopawtra's clairvoyant eyes allowed him to study, he located another exit.

He fled there, hurried as hastily as he could up the stairs, and then emerged from the alternative access, scurrying out of the structure that housed it without delay.

He would then race for his alibi, the tree branch and the ravine, where he intended to lie in wait for his discovery; Frederic planned to remain there until the guards found him, incapacitated and unqualified to serve as their suspect. That he not to be seen anywhere else was all his rouse required to be a success, for he must not to be identified away from the site of his fictional accident. He issued a silent prayer as he rapidly approached the safety provided by his much-needed deception that he would be granted such a small mercy.

Sadly, fortune did not favour the bold that night; upon his arrival, the spy observed rather despondently that a guard was already inspecting the scene of Frederic's contrived alibi and had obviously found no sign of the wayward gardener. GT Twenty-Two kept his presence unnoticed; the effort to evade detection having been a dismal failure, he then engaged in a cautious return to the flat, to collect Cleopawtra and affect their compulsory withdrawal.

The clock too appeared to disapprove of the spy for the authorities, having rapidly established the identity of their suspect, arrived at his residence scant seconds after his own appearance there. Frederic only had the time to obtain his pistol and then, within the bathroom, hide away; in his entire career as a spy, he had never been compelled to murder an innocent law-enforcement officer, and he prayed that his auspicious drought of death would not end that night.

The front door succumbed to the duress of a boot and, followed by their aging Chief Inspector, an agreeable gentleman who had been a frequent visitor of the genteel Frederic Stutt, several policemen then charged into the flat. They commenced their search for the man who had stolen away behind the bathroom door, hunting for any indication that the gardener since exposed as a spy had been foolish enough to return home.

Frederic had been very cautious not to advertise his renewed attendance in the residence and that diligence, combined with some very light scrutiny regarding his hiding place, soon convinced the local constabulary that he was not present. As the police officers moved to depart, the besieged man emitted the tiniest expression of relief; however, the night would prove to frustrate the spy once again. The Inspector, his intuition pleading with him to reconsider, paused in the doorway, for a notion had fermented in his mind as to the whereabouts of the fugitive gardener.

The investigator began to move towards the bathroom; having made his determination that the previous search had been incomplete, the Inspector intended to examine the area for a second time.

His friend, the Chief Inspector slowly crept towards Frederic's hiding place as the spy nurtured his resolve to, should conditions dictate he undertake such an appalling act, shoot the officer. The detective carefully listened for any sound that would indicate his quarry was lurking within the lavatory but, while Frederic silently implored for a miracle, consistently found none.

GT Twenty-Two desperately wished for a distraction that would divert the Inspector from his current pursuit; he issued a spiritual request for his telephone to sound, appended the number of the instrument to his desperate appeal, then mailed it off, with all of the hope that his soul could provide to both everywhere, and nowhere. Under no circumstances did he wish to harm the man with whom he had whiled away the occasional evening in friendship, drinking brandy, and playing the violin.

While the Inspector grew dangerously closer, the progressively more frantic spy ordered, and then pleaded for the telephone to sound. "For the love of all that is Holy," he shouted at it silently, "please ring!"

As it had been directed, the telephone rang punctually; its piercing proclamation shattered the unbearable silence, and disrupted the spell that had been compelling the policeman towards his unseen end. The Inspector's ponderous march came to a halt, the inquisitive investigator curious as to the identity of the caller, and he lifted the receiver to his ear, then issuing a pleasant salutation to the mysterious individual that inhabited the other end of the line.

A moment passed while he listened. "No," the Inspector responded in English to the unknown query, "this is the Stutt residence." He questioned the caller, "Do you know a Frederic Stutt?" and then, he patiently awaited their response. "You must have the wrong number then," he chuckled, the reply obviously to the negative and, with the customary English 'Cheerio,' he concluded the communication. The policeman gave the valediction to the unidentified person with whom he had been speaking cheerily and, his aspirations towards the concealed operative having gone astray, returned the receiver to its cradle.

While in the process of recollecting his thoughts, one of his men called out from the roadway to the Inspector, and reported that a local resident, about a half-mile away had recently observed the hunted groundskeeper. His subordinate made a request to depart from their current location and commence a search of the surrounding area, one that their superior readily granted.

Making one last perusal of the sparsely furnished flat, the Chief Inspector, suitably satisfied with this stage of his investigation, finally took to the exit. The hunt for the mysterious spy would continue; the policeman was certain that this surprise of a man, an unpretentious, well-mannered gardener that the town's residents had known by the fictitious name of Frederic Stutt, would soon be located.

However, the Bavarian in question was not to be seen further; the departure of the Inspector hastened, for the spy adept at disguises an abrupt but effortless change of identity. He was German no longer and instead a French tourist; his accent was expertly altered to suit and, with a feigned lack of comprehension surrounding the local language, even tailored. Frederic was then Henri.

Henri was clean-shaven, whereas Frederic was not; the Frenchman wore glasses, while the Bavarian did not. Unkempt eyebrows were plucked and styled; his hair was dyed in the kitchen sink an inky black. Cleopawtra watched the transformation with great interest, as her human changed like a chameleon in front of her for yet another time; however, although he was different in presentation, to her feline mind he remained the same.

The cat would always know who he was. No matter what Henri, formerly Frederic, previously Francis long ago, could do to alter his appearance Cleopawtra would never fail to recognize her companion. The human's makeover quickly concluded the pair, with all documents having been destroyed and the nook beneath the kitchen cabinetry resealed, then left their most recent home.

No trace of them would remain for the Inspector, when he returned the next day, to uncover; the setting was expertly sanitized, leaving naught upon which a detective could exercise his scrutiny. He found the trail to be completely cold, and then dejectedly concluded that the suspect was beyond his reach.

However, in that the Chief Inspector had not been able to establish what crimes the man had committed, a mystery still remained. He knew only that Frederic was discovered prying somewhere that he apparently should not have been, and indeed, it was as unsettling to learn that the friendly gardener was a spy as it had been to become aware that there had actually been, in his quiet little town, espionage worth conducting.

Perhaps, the Chief Inspector briefly considered, he ought to ascertain what those surreptitious activities were.

Then again, perhaps he should not.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A PHYSICIAN PAYS A VISIT

DOCTOR BRUNSWICK, AS HE STRUGGLED to make his ascent mopped his balding brow; the portly physician eventually conquered the last flight of stairs, and attained the uppermost landing of the block of flats within which resided the eccentric woman who had steadfastly insisted that he carry out an irregular weekday house-call.

A certain Caroline Hawthorn, a novelist, if the doctor recalled correctly, had rung his surgery with concern but, providing no rationale for her inability to make the visit, had refused to attend him there and demanded instead that the astonished practitioner take an unscheduled outing to her home. After some careful, but brief consideration, Brunswick, not only for the sake of the troubled Missus Hawthorn but also to gratify his own curiosity regarding the nature of his exceedingly brash patient, had made the decision to humour the woman.

The doctor was convinced that the stresses of the modern world, the terrible events of the Great War, and the broadcast of such horrors on wireless, and soon television, were to blame for the rise in mentally disturbed individuals that he and other physicians had encountered of late. Brunswick had promptly developed the notion that these factors would likely prove to be the culprits in the speculated complaints to be reported by Missus Hawthorn, and that the peculiar woman would make an excellent case study for his next submission to the *Journal of Medicine*.

However, Doctor Brunswick, as he knocked curtly upon his patient's front door, had no idea as to the true depth of the insanity of which he was soon to bear witness.

"Oh, thank God you came," the short, middle aged woman gushed appreciatively, as she bid the slightly taller man entrance into her flat, "I have no notion as to what I should do over all of this nonsense; my wits are nearing their end." Caroline offered the doctor a cup of tea, and he accepted. The physician

then chose to wait in her sitting room while she prepared the brew and, in an endeavour to construct a profile of his patient, use the opportunity to survey the woman's usual surroundings.

He produced his pipe, struck a match to light it and, whilst he made his observations, puffed on the tobacco. Within the small room, there was a small couch, a chair and two small end tables. A fireplace occupied the far end; its mantle held a clock, a crooked wine bottle with a tapered candle placed in its chimney and a photograph, of the Hawthorn woman and a man, presumably her husband. No art graced the walls; the space was otherwise quite plain. It appeared that the woman had no particular interest in decorating her home. As to her state of mind, that deduction could prove to be a valuable clue.

Brunswick surmised that the woman was a widow; his wife of fifteen years having succumbed to consumption three winters previous, the man was well aware of the distress losing one's mate could bring about. A respectable doctor could no longer attend merely to the physical aspects of their charges; modern thinking was moving to subscribe to the idea that the profession must also be prepared to cater to the ills of the mind, the two components thought to be fully entangled, with the maladies of each profoundly affecting the health of the other.

The physician stowed his thoughts when Missus Hawthorn entered with his tea, and revisited his current setting.

After some polite banter, he proceeded with his evaluation. Upon cursory examination, there did not appear to be anything physically amiss with Caroline Hawthorn. Doctor Brunswick had progressed, under the scrutiny of an extraordinarily large housecat, through his usual battery of tests; he measured the pace of her heart and the strength of her blood pressure, noted her pallor and assessed her reflexes. Her eyes, ears, nose and throat all seemed to be in excellent condition; the physician was, by the complete absence of any input offered on the part his patient regarding her mysterious complaints only perplexed further.

The exhibition having concluded, the bored feline soon took to the floor. He rolled with his paws spread wide onto his back, the cat apparently settling into his preferred position for which to take a nap.

After some measure of silence, spotted only by the eternal cadence marked by the mantle clock had passed, the confounded physician chose to be forward and, as to precisely why she had elected to squander his valuable time by summoning him there, directly inquire of Missus Hawthorn. She became visibly anxious at his query and, after a few nervous minutes the woman, after informing the doctor that she was quite confident she had lost her mind, finally began to relate the foundation of her disquiet.

Caroline began to describe her recent experiences to the doctor in detail, outlining her unintended ghostly typing and the spontaneous recounting; the literary efforts were, or so the woman thought, those of the plump feline slumbering deeply before them. Brunswick was quick to offer an explanation; he surmised that the woman's subconscious mind was using the manuscripts as a medium with which to convey a message, perhaps as a method to confront her emotionally detached consciousness with previously repressed thoughts. Sigmund Freud had written of such behaviour rather comprehensively. Happily, the manifestations were nothing with which the author need concern herself.

All that Missus Hawthorn was required to do would be to permit her psyche to resolve its inner turmoil; then, the writer could be expected to recommence her customary way of life. Further, he was quite vehement in his reiterations that, aside from providing a source of inspiration with which her subconscious mind had fashioned the moral allegories, her pet had played no part in the incidents.

The physician had undertaken a brief perusal of her unforeseen efforts, and found nothing in them that would provoke any state of alarm; apart from the peculiar lines at the end of each tale, the narratives were enjoyable but rather benign.

Even the cryptic proclamations were likely to simply be the bizarre ruminations of her lower self, fabricating the statements from obscure elements of her own personal experience in an effort to achieve some recognition of the message it hoped to communicate. Once she deciphered their true meaning, and understood her own intentions, the disturbances undoubtedly would end.

That convenient diagnosis was regrettably frustrated when the woman insisted on imparting the further extraordinary tale of the obese, blue eyed ginger-tabby, the cat she referred to as Fatticus, whom she alleged had succeeded upon traversing the entryway to the flat having neglected to first remove the substantial impediment of the solid oak door.

"He was here, inside the flat, running towards the door and then, he was not," said Caroline with an air of astonishment. "It really was quite disturbing."

"This begs me to question your consumption of alcohol," started Brunswick, interrupted sharply by the offended author.

Haughtily, she retorted, "I assure you, sir, I was not drunk. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Fatticus was chasing a mouse."

"Did the mouse run through the door?"

“Do not be absurd. Who has ever heard of a teleporting mouse? No, he went into a hole in the baseboard.” Caroline looked contemplative. “It started, I think with that confusing telephone call.”

Doctor Brunswick quietly allowed her to detail the outlandish fantasy, and then deliberated a number of possible explanations. Her experience might have been an illusion, a trick of the light, or the result of a brief episode of amnesia. Missus Hawthorn may have forgotten placing the feline in the hall, the incident likely caused by the same stressor responsible for her spontaneous typing.

Alternatively, and this was a possibility the physician was gravely forced to entertain, Caroline Hawthorn had become clinically delusional, and would soon require hospitalization.

There were a number of facts that demanded he consider them; she was an older woman, a widower with no other companionship than that of her cat. The author appeared to be bound to her flat, potentially agoraphobic, prone to fits of apparent schizophrenia and given to flights of fancy regarding the impossible abilities of her feline housemate.

The weight of all of these very compelling details were tugging at the physician to conclude that she had indeed, as the writer herself had termed it, ‘lost her mind.’

The constancy of her sanity had become a topic open for further discussion.

However, he chose to keep such a train of thought private, and hope to convince the unbalanced woman that her experience had resulted from illusion, or mental absence. Serious action would not be required if the physician were able to compel his patient to agree that her animal had ventured outside in some other fashion but, to his great consternation, the woman would not give any thought to his alternative speculations.

The widow Hawthorn absolutely refused to repent, and her obstinacy condemned her.

Doctor Brunswick would then evaluate the threat that Caroline posed to herself, and the likelihood she would cause harm to others; this was the common means of assessing the urgency for her placement within a sanatorium. Her condition was likely to deteriorate rapidly, progressing to paranoia, and then to fits of rage; she would become unable to tend to her own needs and starve, or perhaps even expire of thirst.

He would need to carefully consider these possibilities before choosing a course of action upon which to embark; the fundamental question was that of

whether modern medicine could prevent Caroline Hawthorn from descending completely into madness, or if her fate was already sealed.

As if prompted by his deliberations, Caroline suddenly leapt up, tossing her teacup towards the opposite wall and spreading over the sitting room carpet the remainder of its contents; her slumbering feline, when she dashed towards her study, was narrowly avoided. The doctor, both in alarm at her arbitrary movements but also in earnest to establish the basis of her rash action hastily followed her.

He found her sitting peacefully, almost as if in a trance, in her chair to the front of her typewriter; a single number was printed upon the paper ensconced in the platen.

“MISSUS HAWTHORN!” he shouted, his bellowing not only raising the woman from her transfixion, but any nearby deceased from their graves. “What,” he posed his query, after regaining his composure more calmly, “is the meaning of this?”

Caroline, her recollection of the preceding incident woefully absent, could only stare at him in surprised silence. Doctor Brunswick, the physician tapping frantically at the number it displayed, forcefully removed the page from the typewriter, and thrust it into the face of the befuddled widow.

“This! What does it mean?” he demanded.

“I am afraid I do not know.” The series of digits, upon their initial examination, held no meaning for her; their further scrutiny, on her part, led to no recognition. The perturbed physician, hoping to determine the significance of the nameless number, began his own efforts at analysis.

“Well, strike me blind,” he started, with increasing enthusiasm, “I think this is, I am certain it is, a German telephone number!” Overwhelmed by his escalating curiosity, he had the mystified widow Hawthorn direct him to her handset where he fervently connected to the mysterious digits listed upon the piece of paper. His breath was held in the anticipation of hearing the anonymous voice that he hoped would respond to his appeal for dialogue.

Caroline intently followed the proceedings, as the physician appeared to make human contact.

“To whom am I speaking?” he inquired of the unnamed recipient of his haphazard telephone call.

“Frederic Stutt?” Brunswick repeated the name to Missus Hawthorn who, no recognition of the name betrayed in her expression, shook her head quietly to the negative.

“No,” the doctor told the nameless phantom, “I am afraid we are not familiar with a Frederic Stutt.”

The man then, in agreement with the unseen orator nodded his head. “I see. Good day to you then.”

That there might have been some long-lost relative, or forgotten acquaintance of Caroline located at the noted extension had been a foolish notion; unfortunately, it was merely numerical nonsense.

He had come to his conclusion; his diagnosis was determined. The physician would have the obviously disturbed author committed to an asylum.

All of a sudden, a vast feline howl erupted from elsewhere in the flat; it was followed, straight away, by the frenzied sounds such as the efforts of an unwieldy, overweight cat to make a frenetic chase after an as-yet-unknown prey might produce. The two humans, in their mounting sense of foreboding, remained stationary as the cyclone made its way towards them; a tiny mouse soon appeared at the door to the study and, in a bid to escape the gargantuan beast that was pursuing it, fled within.

The jellied mass, of feline fat and ginger fur collided heavily with furniture and walls as the cat, against the tiny rodent fought his campaign; the mouse did its utmost to elude the lumbering lummoX whose ire it had drawn, erratically darting between various furnishings in panic. The author, and her physician each did what they could to stay out of the ginger-tabby’s destructive path, the pair needing to move quickly to avoid, by the hefty behemoth, being bowled over in his irregular safari about the room.

“FATTICUS!” Caroline shrieked finally, prompting the terrified mouse to abandon the study with the cat directly afterwards, the two creatures opting to take their feral circus elsewhere.

From one room to the next, the carnival continued; the events in the study were followed by similar displays in the sitting room, bedroom and the kitchen. The living wrecking-ball displaced all that could be dislocated, and tossed over anything prone to tumble; the tabby was fully intent upon concluding his performance with the capture of the prey that had for so long eluded him.

The mouse, having come to its senses sought a repeat of the conclusion to their previous spectacle. It found the wherewithal to attempt an escape, into the hole in the baseboard beside the front door, by scurrying down the hall. The cat took chase once more and, with baited breath, both physician and author stood noiseless while the two creatures approached the end of the passage.

The two humans studied the scene intently, hoping to discover if the improbable, nay the impossible would take place again.

That is to say, they awaited a miracle.

Fatticus captured the mouse. The cat had leapt as best he could, snatching the rodent's tail in his mouth. Then, bliss enveloped him entirely. The realization that the chubby feline had accomplished what had taken so painfully long enraptured his mind thoroughly; he had finally succeeded in triumphing over his principal rival, and reclaimed his honour. Fatticus would relish the glory that his Lady Caroline, in appreciation for ridding her kingdom of the filthy vermin would most assuredly soon bestow upon him.

In fact, he was so engrossed in his inner celebration that the door was ignored once more; its existence proved to be of no consequence to the airborne ginger-tabby, and he passed through it unhindered. Fatticus, with the mouse lost from his clutches, was tossed into a heap upon the floor in the hallway beyond.

His prize took flight from its temporarily stunned captor, and made a winning bid for continued freedom.

For the feline to right himself took great effort; his attempt at exertion was clouded with the darkness of his despair. The cat quickly realized that, not only he had misplaced his precious trophy but he was also making observations of the outward face of the flat's front door.

Doctor Brunswick remained in a state of complete confusion while Caroline, through the scratching and howling of her stranded feline, regained her grasp on reality significantly enough to allow the cat to return, opening the mystifying door that had recently granted a ghostly passage to both a ginger-tabby and a mouse.

The whole affair was an absolute impossibility; the display that the physician had just witnessed must have been one borne of deception, an elaborate ruse. Logic declared that it could simply not have been as it seemed; however, he was having some difficulty reconciling what he had observed as anything other than what it appeared, a poignant demonstration of flesh and bone passing through oak and nail.

Doctor Brunswick could find no comfort through mental resolution, and soon took to anger towards what he was convinced was an intricate charade, played out at his expense. As the crestfallen enigma of a creature sauntered despondently past the outraged physician, the furious gentleman moved to take his leave, and rid himself of Caroline Hawthorn, her bizarre riddles and her Newton-defying beast.

Missus Hawthorn, on the other hand, displayed no emotion. Whilst Brunswick haughtily inquired if she was pleased with her accomplishments, the woman only remained in a state of shock, and derisively bidding her adieu, the

physician, wishing to never see any of it ever again struck off past the baffling door, hastily navigating the hallway and making swift passage of the stairs.

He pledged that, in future, if he could do so in any way, he would avoid not merely the flat but also its block, the street that it faced and the neighbourhood within which it resided.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A DARING ESCAPE

WHEN THE BRITISH MADE THEIR TIMELY ENTRANCE, they had made a simple offer to Fritz; either the captured German would come to find himself in their employ, or he would be tried for war crimes. They would vigorously prosecute him for his involvement in experimentation that, as a means of encouraging their participation, chose to starve Allied soldiers. Unwillingly forced into the service of the program by his own treacherous government, Fritz was eager to pledge his loyalty to those he saw as his liberators, making an immediate decision to provide his new superiors with all that he knew.

His captors treated his enthusiastic collaboration with suspicion; they wished to be certain that the German's new allegiances towards the Crown were genuine. Obtaining such an assurance involved a great deal of interrogation and careful consideration, and it was eventually determined that, much as a dog dedicates himself to the masters of his new home, Fritz could indeed be loyal and obey his British commanders.

The victors of the Great War took, as a part of their spoils, their latest recruit to England. The spy was completely devoted to those he saw as his saviours, and Fritz was quite pleased to bid farewell to the carnage that had become of his former country. In return for the British hospitality, he agreed to serve as a nameless operative in the recently formed Feline Remote Intelligence Gathering Service, his designation to be GT Ninety-Nine.

He would not act as a remote operative, nor as a receiver; Fritz had demonstrated some limited telepathic ability, but attempts to pair him with one of the blue-eyed ginger-tabbies had never found any success. After he and the remainder of the clandestine German program were transferred to an English location, it was shown that his lack of empathy made him incapable of bonding with the felines. He was a morose, withdrawn man, his history spotted with violence and sadness; his soul had been darkened with the soot of cruelty and suffering.

His intended partner, Subject Forty-Two, never felt any affection for Fritz; she did not take to him in the slightest and had difficulty merely enduring his presence. Despite her best efforts, she was never able to convince herself to trust him; any attempts by the man to gain her confidence were overwhelmed by his negativity. He had not even shown enough amity towards the feline to give her a name.

Although tested for psychic abilities the failure, on the part of the program's original architects to assess the feline compatibility of their recruits was rather short sighted. It quickly became evident that neither Subject Forty-Two, nor any other cat would ever bond with such an emotionally barren individual.

The various attempts made to persuade his feline partner to appreciate the nonexistent brighter side of Fritz served only to heighten the anxiety felt by the cat; her apprehension soon tainted her capacity to trust any other person, his ominous personality darkening all of humanity with its limitless shadow. The scientists, desperate to make use of her diligently refined connection to Subject Sixty-Four attempted to couple her with other men, but after the trauma she had experienced during her first association she had become unapproachable.

Found unsuitable for field purposes, Subject Forty-Two received an alternative assignment, to function as breeding stock in the hope that her offspring would prove to have a greater facility for the duties that she had failed to perform.

GT Ninety-Nine was, as a prospective feline-paired operative similarly abandoned; instead, his less endearing talents were put to use maintaining a tight grip around the metaphorical neck of an obstinate man who had been proven to be a far greater cog in the machinery of the program than Fritz could have ever been.

Meanwhile, Subject Forty-Two proved her capacity as a queen to be of immense value, producing several litters of healthy blue-eyed kittens. She completed her fourth pregnancy and was soon well into her fifth, the timid cat all the while awaiting an opportunity to flee from the humans who had frightened her so and run from the heinous facility, far away.

Through her passive behaviour, she had lulled Hans, the rather sulky caretaker for whom no love was lost amongst his feline captives, into a false sense of security. He had taken, whilst he tended to her stall to leaving her cage door ajar, convinced the pregnant cat posed no threat and would not, while his eyes were cast elsewhere, attempt to leave it. Subject Forty-Two had carefully nurtured this rather misplaced sense of trust, preserving it for the precious moment when the circumstances were ideal, and a sequence of events could be set in motion that would lead to her escape.

Hans was not quite as welcoming when the British had made their unwelcome intrusion upon his homeland as his comrade Fritz. However, their proposition towards the vanquished German was, when compared with the possibility of imprisonment or execution, rather attractive. All he would be required to do was continue on as before, disposing of feline faeces and distributing their bland nutritional supplements; in exchange, he would be permitted some measure of freedom and more importantly avoid death.

It was a reasonable arrangement.

Subject Forty-Two's cage resided upon the second level of a rectangular kennel, itself three rows high, the space housing seventy-four ginger tabbies and their associated offspring. Hans, responsible for their care, had a small supply cart that he would wheel about; the man occasionally crouched behind it in order to dispose of items such as kitty litter, or uneaten kibble into the rubbish basket below.

Only a single entrance led into the room, the door opposite the cat's simple residence at the far end of the corridor; it closed automatically a few short moments after it opened, making for a very sparing length of time in which a ginger-tabby could mount an effort at obtaining her freedom.

This precaution, combined with her condition gave Hans the confidence to conclude that in the unlikely event the passive offspring-laden feline should attempt to depart she would never escape from the room, even though John, his British supervisor would be inclined to look in on him while he tended to that particular tabby. The exact timing of his superior's arrival was typically erratic, and it had been rather difficult for Subject Forty-Two to establish a pattern; however, she eventually determined that the precise moment of his appearance followed a haphazard rotation of exactly twenty-three days.

Her calculations regarding John's emergence had been, for each of the last seven days, completely accurate; she felt that today would be the occasion on which she would use his predictability to her benefit.

The uprooted German custodian of cats had bent down to dispose, into the bin set into the base of his cart, of some waste generated by Subject Forty-Two when the heavily burdened feline made a carefully considered leap, from the door of her cell down on to the end of the trolley opposite from the unwary human. This led immediately to a second jump, this one onto the floor, forcing the cart to move in the opposite direction and quite forcefully sending the handle of the wheeled contraption into the forehead of the oblivious custodian.

At that particular moment, John entered through the door towards which Subject Forty-Two, with all the haste the pregnant feline could manage, was heading. The supervisor, dumbfounded by the disconcerting scene fashioned by

the profusely bleeding gash in Hans's forehead, held the door open in his effort to summon some aid for the fallen man; meanwhile, the fugitive tabby charged past the legs of the preoccupied manager, and out into the underground corridors of the F.R.I.G.S. facility.

The half-conscious Hans was frustratingly unable, regarding the escaping Subject Forty-Two, to raise the alarm, having mislaid the ability to make any coherent sense to his cohorts. Eventually, whilst his wayward prisoner made her frantic departure through the endless web of passageways, he simply collapsed onto the floor; the cat, in the meantime, embarked upon a harried search for a gateway that led to the freedom of the world beyond. Subject Forty-Two had a great deal of faith that she would soon find her place, in the realm that she was convinced must exist beyond the cold concrete walls.

She swam upstream against the current of humans rushing to aid their stricken colleague, the cat resisting her instinctual urge to flee from them, and instead running past them unnoticed; her reasoning, that they would ignore her in their desire to treat the afflictions she had prompted in the fallen member of their species, proved rational. Subject Forty-Two had felt a great deal of guilt regarding her harmful actions; the experience distressed her significantly, but there had simply been no alternate course of action. She was unable to reconcile herself to the prospect of delivering yet another litter of kittens into the hands of the scientists to face, in such barren and sterile surroundings, an uncertain fate.

Her quest continued; the ginger-tabby raced counter to those proceeding to whence she came, her hope to discover the origin of the surge of humanity, a point at which Subject Forty-Two expected to uncover an exit. Upon her approach, doors appeared to conveniently swing themselves open; the cat graciously accepted their courtesy and, retaining no memory of her eventual transit, she abruptly became aware that she was outdoors, surrounded by ominous darkness, and enveloped by the biting winter cold.

The pregnant feline continued her rapid pace, free from captivity and her kittens safe from the strange ways of humanity, but ensnared by the only forest she had ever experienced. It appeared to be a haunted place, of mysterious noises made by fearsome creatures yet unseen.

Deliberations upon the proposal that the enterprise had been a mistake soon began; the notion that she had succeeded only in placing herself and her offspring in greater peril was to be debated. Unable to find any comfort in her harsh environs, she strode onward; the discussion continued, but reached no firm conclusions. At that point, the feline merely wished to place as much distance between herself and her former prison as she could manage.

The reality was that Subject Forty-Two had a greater fear that she would linger in the soulless prison for the remainder of her days than she had of facing

the strange dominion that was the natural world. She had determined that a short life of freedom was preferable to a long existence in captivity; such liberty would be well worth any potential cost.

Subject Forty-Two noticed a light in the darkness, a glow far in the distance that seemed to hold the assurance of warmth, of shelter and of peace. The fugitive feline travelled on, throughout the shadows of night and, in the early morning light, she found a hollow beneath a tree in which she could entrust her weary body.

It was a place where she would dream of attaining the heaven she had envisioned for many years, a paradise where she and her kittens would roam free as they desired, dine on all manner of succulent cuisine, and never need to face the anxiety of being separated from each other again.

She quite simply dreamt of a feline utopia.

Night made a return, as did the distant radiance and the rested tabby resumed her pursuit of the glow that she was convinced held the promise of a better future. Then, when daylight came she slept once more, and revelled in the fantasies of her slumber. However, there was growing unease; the pregnant feline was developing a grave hunger. She could find none of her rations anywhere; this new world appeared to be devoid of kibble, and the feline had no means with which to satiate her pangs for sustenance.

The runaway found nothing culinarily attractive about the various materials of green and brown that surrounded her, and her instinct had not yet driven her to submit to the ghoulish notion of digesting the lesser creatures that inhabited the land through which she made her crucial expedition. She desperately needed to find provisions, specifically her usual fare, or she was liable to perish.

Despite her hunger, her brave march toward the seemingly unreachable glow continued, past the endless vistas of auburn and jade. The cat grew weaker with every passing day until each step was a laborious, tedious effort thought to likely be her last.

The ravenous animal, plagued by starvation-induced delirium, transitioned into a new realm of black and grey, a stark place with warm lights filled with enormous beasts, some tethered to other odd creatures. By then, the feline was unable to determine reality from fantasy; her increasing dementia filled her mind with nonsensical thoughts.

She travelled, aimlessly and erratically, along the rocky path inhabited by the behemoths; death by their trampling was narrowly avoided on several occasions. Her resources entirely depleted, she finally collapsed.

The cat became lost to a world that she could never comprehend; her failed mission was at a disastrous end.

As Death approached, she dreamt of her Utopia, imagined that she had made it there safely, and that her kittens had been born; they were thriving, amongst the many wondrous spectacles the feline heaven had to behold, such as cobalt lakes of cool, fresh water and tan mountains of nourishing kibble. The ginger-tabby was happy and free; in her delirium, the vision blended with reality and, in the falsehood that she had succeeded in providing a better life for her children, she found comfort. Although she was soon to expire, they would possess full lives, free from the slavery of which she had suffered.

There was an odd smell in her personally tailored Heaven.

The aroma was not of her doing; she had never borne witness to any such scent before, and she found the pungent odour rather attractive. Despite her sight having failed, her desire compelled her to lap at it unseen and sample with her tongue what she had sensed with her nose. The liquid was warm, pleasing and exceptionally appetizing; the tabby consumed as much of it as she could manage before her meagre strength failed, and she could engage upon any further tasting no longer. As she drifted back into her land of dreams, she entertained the notion that the delectable fluid was ambrosia and therefore, she must be in the afterlife.

Between bouts of slumber, additional doses of the heavenly substance graced her tongue, and with each infusion, the ginger-tabby regained a modicum of her strength. Her vision slowly regained its focus, and her ears heard more of the new world that surrounded the feline. She found herself with humans once again and, although that had frightened her initially, the cat quickly developed a great sense of trust for the one who had nursed her back to health.

Although her rational mind felt that her belief in the woman was misplaced, she allowed her emotions to rule the day, and placed her faith in the one that had saved her life.

That it was a confidence well deserved would soon be established. Ginger, the blue eyed tabby-cat formerly known as Subject Forty-Two had indeed located her Utopia, and had delivered her kittens to safety in a home where they would grow up free of the trials she had been forced to endure. Not only a place of freedom, her new habitat also provided many scrumptious tastes and smells, enthralling sights and intriguing sounds; she discovered that the world beyond that of a cold steel cage proved to be rather engaging.

It would be quite the understatement to say that Ginger had found her happiness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

AN URGENT WARNING

HAVING SEEN HER PLUMP, ginger-haired illusionist perform his feat for a second time had only served to further bewilder Caroline Hawthorn. Doctor Brunswick's seeming refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of Fatticus's odd accomplishment had not aided in the writer's efforts to establish her sanity or lack thereof, the physician choosing to believe that it had been a trick, a deception engineered by the woman for her own unspoken ends.

It would seem that Brunswick thought of Caroline as either a lunatic or a charlatan, neither of which she found appealing. The events regarding the telephone call had been quite perplexing as well. Pondering upon them led only to an increasing series of questions, matched with very few answers. In short, it was still quite likely she had lost her mind, the visit from the doctor producing to that most important of concerns no resolution.

The morose tabby, meanwhile cursed the world beyond that had robbed him, the celestial comedian that had stolen his trophy from his clutches and the prankster that had concocted, at the expense of Fatticus's pride a cruel amusement. He did nothing for the remainder of the day but squat in the centre of the study floor and sulk, staring off at nothing, long-suffering sighs producing themselves from the forlorn tabby at regular intervals.

The mouse had been his, of that there could be no dispute; the cat had masterfully captured his prey, the tail of the pesky little rodent having been in the mouth of the triumphant predator, firmly entrenched.

Then, it was gone, taken away from the celebrating feline by a callous, insensitive world, one in which the solidity of doors was a matter for debate, and where reality could be revised in an instant. They laughed at the poor miserable cat, the evil spirits that had made him so large, and tempted him with tasty, tiny self-propelling morsels. Those events had only served to reinforce upon Fatticus that there truly was no fairness in life.

He marinated in his abandon as a pig wallows in a sty full of fresh wet mud, taking to his heavily inflated sense of despair with great relish whilst his human companion, over a bottle of inexpensive French wine, pondered the incongruity of the universe.

Christmas was coming; it was not by any measure Caroline's favourite time of year, especially not since that last Yuletide at the Hawthorn family home, when Francis had informed her of his promotion; she had cried, and he had comforted her. Now, as with the unenlightened Ebenezer Scrooge, it was merely 'Bah, Humbug' to her, serving as an uncomfortable reminder of the family she no longer had, and of the husband whom she missed so terribly.

In recent years, she had bent to her conscience just enough to treat Fatticus; there was no purpose in penalizing a poor cat in order to enforce her embargo of the holiday, but she would cater to it no further than that.

She fed Fatticus then, placing a can of tuna in his supper dish; however, it was not sufficient to rouse the feline from his depression. He dejectedly made his way to his bowl as if a cat condemned, and merely sniffed at it; the cat made an about face, returned to the study and repositioned himself into the precise location that he had been only moments before.

The tabby persisted in his protest of the appalling treatment he had received at the hands of the universe and, towards the exact same empty point in space, resumed his stare.

Caroline, in response to the overacting feline's pathetic display, shook her head and, not wishing to let the fish go to waste, took to his tuna. She hoped that the impending visit of Missus Tottenham on the following morning would recover the morale of her despondent cat. If anything had the capacity to do so, it would be the wiles of that housekeeper.

The still arguably sane writer decided to turn in for the night, and resign the strange day to the annals of her ill-fated history, the memories of which were best left far behind. Instead, she looked forward to tomorrow, when she would deliver two more stories to her publisher that, she had since been convinced, were dictated to her by her cat.

Doctor Brunswick, in the meantime was having a rather restless night. He took to his library, pacing back and forth while his mind continued in its endeavour to reconcile just how it was that the writer's cat had managed to either accomplish the deed, or how it had achieved the illusion that the physician had witnessed. Unfortunately, the man was making very little progress in his ruminations; if it was a trick, it had been brilliant and if it was not, it defied all rational explanation.

His agitation was more borne perhaps of the offence that the affair had committed upon his sensibilities. In disturbing his rather rigid view of the world, the author and her strange animal had done Brunswick a great disservice. By forcing him to question his most cherished beliefs, they had conducted an outrageous assault upon his intellectual person.

This slight had made the typically sensible gentleman quite irate; however, it was proving difficult to repudiate the events that he had observed. The physician found himself gradually drawing to the conclusion that the performance to which he had served as audience had been genuine, and that it was no trick. It appeared that under certain conditions, one unique creature occupying the face of the Earth could pass through any solid object or, at the very least, an oaken door.

He resolved to return; Brunswick would make another appearance at the peculiar flat in the morning, and then deduce if there had truly been no deception. He would thoroughly examine that cat, and scrupulously scrutinize the door until he either exposed the routine as a fraud, or persuaded himself that there were indeed things in the world that he would never be capable of comprehending. Regardless of what he concluded, any resolution would permit him to obtain the respite that currently lay far removed from his grasp.

Doctor Brunswick would pace and ponder the night through, while Caroline slept and dreamt, in her slumber of polite, clean-shaven young men in gleaming white coats who would come and, to a place in which she would never be suffered to conclude, decide or deduce ever again, take her away.

The dawn arrived and Fatticus, having previously refused his supper had since had his hunger strike overruled by his progressively more antagonized midsection. He had fallen to sleep on the red Chinese rug and awoken to find his stomach completely hollow, the void that resided within painfully tugging at his exterior, threatening to drag the rest of him within it unless it was promptly satisfied.

The cat made the struggle up onto the bed and gently moved to awake Lady Caroline.

Fatticus licked Caroline's nose, and then, with no progress made in his quest to rouse his Lady, lapped at it again. Difficult times called for severe measures, and he began to paw at her snout, gently tapping at it as if he was swatting an errant kitten. The human emitted some cataleptic murmuring and her face wrinkled somewhat but the tabby observed no return to wakefulness.

It was necessary, Fatticus told himself. Further action must be taken lest he vanish completely, drawn into the abyss that inhabited his stomach. His

absence would be a far worse consequence for his Lady than what he would be required to do in order to raise her.

The grossly obese cat clambered up on top of Caroline's chest; his weight pushed down upon her insides, and prevented her from gaining any further breath. It took only a matter of seconds before her eyes blinked open. The startled woman was barely conscious of the fact that she was unable to breathe, but aware enough to know that something had to hastily be done about it. Sitting up failed, as the ginger-coloured medicine ball that had opted to straddle her had managed, in those few scant moments it had taken for her to awake, to himself take to slumber.

Unable to yet realize that her cat was the source of her distress, Caroline performed the only movement of which she remained capable. She flailed her arms violently as her predicament became increasingly serious; the lack of oxygen stifled any other course of action, and any ability to discern what had gone amiss was taken with her precious air.

Fortunately, his human mattress had, for the cat to continue his impromptu siesta, become far too animated. He mercifully dismounted the suffocating woman, Caroline frantically gasping, once she was again permitted such a luxury, for breath and gratefully drawing in the gas necessary for her continued survival.

"You... I... cat..." she wheezed, while she took deep gulps of air; her cat, as her pallor returned to its typical pink from the dark purple which it had briefly become, stared at her curiously.

"Fatticus... you... little..."

He blinked at her innocently; after all, he required his nutrition. It had become crucial that, before disaster ensued, he engage in such behaviour. Fatticus nonchalantly departed from the bed, his task complete and, to await the imminent deposit of kibble into his bowl, casually made his way to the kitchen.

Caroline grouchyly arose from her bed, and gruffly fulfilled her cat's culinary needs.

His display of sheer gall caused her to scratch at her head in disbelief while she went off to bathe in preparation of her ill-begun morning. It was time for her weekly errands, and Missus Tottenham would be by soon to oversee her cat while Caroline, with the two tales she had recounted to her typewriter a few days before, 'A Friend In Need' and 'The Barn Cat and the Owl,' paid a visit to her publisher.

She had a poor sentiment regarding the day; something about it felt incorrect, but Caroline did what she could to rid herself of such notions, discounting them as merely another symptom of her tragic mental decline.

At least the cat was lively again, having quickly come to realize that he was soon to receive his dearest friend, the housekeeper that provided him with untold benefits. Caroline was content just to see her precious feline in high spirits, and no jealousy nor further question was given as to Missus Tottenham's methods or motives. The author was quite appreciative that her looming presence was enough to raise Fatticus from his former state of dismay.

She completed the necessary arrangements for her itinerary; subsequently, the housekeeper arrived, with the two humans making their pleasantries and then Caroline, off to secure further kibble and merlot, swiftly departed.

An odd-looking fellow stood smoking a cigarette on the pathway in front of her flat; he looked a bit peculiar, this strange man, but Caroline had little time to spend determining the character of loiterers. Safe in the knowledge that the stern Missus Tottenham was watching over both her cat and their residence she put aside her concerns, then carried on to the publisher, to provide her editor with some original material for their unexpectedly thriving children's magazine.

The trip was uneventful; the editor, Ted, was pleased with her pieces and, choosing not to discuss her suspicion that her cat was the true author of the work, she accepted his praise. He reminded Caroline again of his hope for a further romance novel; she told him that she truly felt that anything was possible, and then he ordered that a cheque be written for the writer to take to her bank, with which to deposit and secure the financial future of her and her feline for yet another month.

She proceeded to depart the offices but, before she exited the building, Ted stopped her; there had been a forgotten matter. A man, of rather grim façade had appeared a week or two prior, making enquiries regarding Caroline; he questioned the staff rather heatedly regarding the final lines in her previous two publications.

The editor had informed him that the sentences were meaningless, that they were just childish absurdity, and had comically asked the man if he wished to licence their copyright. He was humourless and unconvinced; Ted had then requested quite firmly that the argumentative gentleman leave the premises. Eventually, his refusals to depart forced the editor to ring the constabulary and the man chose, before the timely arrival of the police, to make himself scarce.

Ted had presumed that the fellow was merely another author-obsessed psychotic, and did not see reason to disturb Caroline with his antics at that time.

However, the returning attendance of the strange finale's in her recent submissions had prompted the editor, in the event that he had further elected to approach her, to warn the writer of the unruly fellow's presence there.

He then urged Caroline to enlighten him as to the purposes served by the outlandish riddles; in reply, she could only shake her head and say that she did not know. The lines, she stated flatly, were simply a part of her inspiration.

On instinct, Caroline solicited a more detailed description of the bothersome man and then, by Ted's account, became increasingly unsettled; the depiction of the menace proved accurate to her memory of the loiterer who had been observed outside her flat earlier that morning.

She frantically implored Ted to make attempts to reach her housekeeper by telephone and warn her of the hazard that the man posed; then, whilst she sprinted from the offices of her publisher, she mumbled her desire to swiftly return to her residence.

Caroline began a harried and hectic race back to her home, her housekeeper and a precious ginger-tabby named Fatticus.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE UNINVITED GUEST

AS CAROLINE EMBARKED UPON HER DESPERATE JOURNEY, the frocked Fatticus, Missus Tottenham and Victoria Melbourne were ensconced in their traditional tea ceremony. The twelve year-old girl, who resided across the hall had, some weeks before, inquired politely at the door if she might see the ginger-tabby, having spotted him through her peephole during visits to the flat by the housekeeper, and the landlord Mister Kao.

She had felt that Missus Hawthorn was far too stern to grant her such a request, and had waited for her absence in order to make her petition of the housekeeper, who had merely smiled and led the wide-eyed child into the sitting room where Fatticus, dressed in his frock and bonnet sat lapping at his tea-spotted milk.

Her appearance at the tea parties became a regular occurrence, and the three would each, in the company of the others have a splendid time.

This week, the amateur seamstress had presented a new outfit to the cat. It was a special gown, constructed from velvet and lace that Victoria felt quite certain made the ginger tabby appear rather fetching; indeed, he was quite delighted with it. The housekeeper had been discussing the affairs of her children. One of her daughters was in disagreement with her husband, and another was with child. In the near future, Missus Tottenham would be a grandmother for the fourth time over.

An unexpected knock at the door quieted any further news; they had remained in silence whilst the knock sounded once more. The second occurrence was quite determined, and somewhat impatient.

"I will be with you in just a moment," Missus Tottenham called merrily towards the door. Hiding her annoyance whilst assuring her teatime companions that she would be gone for but a minute, she then rose to see to whoever it was

that with their self-perceived urgency had deemed it appropriate to interrupt their party.

While the housekeeper progressed down the hall, the knock resounded again.

“Just one moment, I told you,” she barked at the door in obvious irritation as she approached it. Then, Missus Tottenham opened it to reveal the source of the intrusion that on the other side awaited her.

In the meantime, Doctor Brunswick had departed, late in the morning from his own residence and, while en-route to the flat thought to be currently occupied only by an eccentric writer and her overweight tabby, his purpose had been made clear. He would determine the truth of the matter; through complex examination he would discover if and how the feline had achieved his conveyance to the opposite side of a firmly shut, solid oak door.

He would prevail; of this, there was no question in the physician’s mind, for he must prove successful in order to quiet his own rather disturbed psyche.

The widow Hawthorn would have no choice but to permit the doctor to carry out his investigation. If she did not, he would threaten to commit her to enforced psychiatric care, or contact Scotland Yard and accuse her of committing a fraud with a yet undetermined motive. Preferring neither of those alternatives, she was certain to allow Brunswick access into her home to comprehensively examine both it, and her novelty of a cat.

His anguished mind demanding the comfort given through exact deduction, the doctor hastened his trip as best as he was able, soon thereafter nearing the fated block of flats.

Having hired a car, Caroline too was on her way back to her residence. Her own sense of urgency had been made repeatedly clear to the driver of the vehicle that she presently occupied. She was terrified that something awful would befall the gentle Missus Tottenham or her beloved Fatticus, the man observed lurking she was quite certain the same hooligan that had harassed her editor Ted and his staff.

His motives were unclear, but potentially ominous; she had heard of people who had developed obsessions for authors, bizarre fixations in which they acquired strange notions about a writer’s work, and became convinced that there was more to their writings than there truly was.

These people were said to be capable of almost anything, Caroline had read; they would stalk an author, kidnap them or even worse. That she could have developed one such individual from a pair of innocent children’s stories was

seemingly inexplicable, but regrettably a quite real possibility. She had a horrible feeling that the disturbing fellow posed, to all concerned, a legitimate threat.

The physician entered the block of flats at ground level, and heard in the distance a loud argument. He surmised it to be taking place at the height of the staircase. There seemed to be quite the struggle proceeding between a hooligan with a German accent, and a proper Englishwoman. He was demanding admittance to her flat, and she was resisting with all her resolve.

Urged by common decency to provide the woman with his aid Doctor Brunswick, in his foray up the stairs made haste, but for the sleep-deprived man the climb went slowly. He could only listen helplessly as the ruffian appeared to overpower the poor woman and then made, into her home, an unwelcome entrance.

Missus Tottenham had fought the rather sizeable man off as best she could, unwilling to yield to him and, to the residence that had been placed in her charge, permit his admittance. The criminal had initially attempted to persuade her that he was acquainted with Missus Hawthorn; however, the housekeeper could not fathom the likes of such a vulgar fellow having, with her sophisticated employer, any such association.

The suspicious gentleman then made the rather dubious claim that he had paid a visit to repair one of the gentlewoman's appliances, but Missus Tottenham knew his sort, and had insisted that the man make another call later that afternoon, after the lady of the house returned.

She politely excused herself when the telephone began to ring, the opportunity sponsoring an attempt to shut the door on the miserable scoundrel. Unfortunately, the action only prompted the powerful man to force his way easily through the entrance. The housekeeper did her utmost to persuade the brute to go elsewhere but sadly, she failed, eventually succumbing to his hostile methods and, unable to prolong the encounter any further, falling to the floor.

Once they had heard the commotion at the front door, Fatticus and Victoria took to the study. The feline hid under a chair, and the girl found refuge beneath Caroline's typing table. They were both quite frightened; Fatticus wished that his Lady would return to defend him, and Victoria prayed for the arrival of the police.

The man had beset upon their friend, Missus Tottenham while they listened; the intruder then, in search of what they did not know, moved about the flat unhindered.

GT Ninety-Nine was on the hunt for a certain ginger-tabby. He knew it was present in the residence; it must be there, he had seen it with his own rather

trustworthy eyes. The feline had thus far eluded his gaze, but if he must, he would tear the flat to pieces, scrutinizing it from floor to ceiling in order to locate the bizarre animal. Then, he would be able to decisively prove to his commander that there had been substance to his claims; that his suspicions had been correct would be established, and then the service would move, before she could instigate her conspiracy to take into custody one Caroline Hawthorn.

Brunswick reached the top of the stairs and, while he rested briefly on the third floor landing, considered his next move. The front door to the Hawthorn home was ajar. There was no question that the dispute he had aurally witnessed had its source there; the woman he had heard was likely a friend or the housekeeper of the novelist.

Since he had not observed a man descend past him down the staircase, he concluded it to be a certainty that the intruder remained within the flat. Had the brute been so easily able to overpower the woman, it was quite likely that the hooligan would encounter little trouble in subduing the hefty, middle-aged physician who was from his climb quite fatigued.

The telephone persisted to sound relentlessly within the residence, whilst Ted the editor continued with his desperate task of striving to reach the housekeeper who, unfortunately lay in the entry hall, comatose upon the floor. Meanwhile, the uninvited guest that had encouraged her current condition continued to make his way through the flat, on his mission to identify and capture one obese, blue-eyed ginger-tabby.

Fatticus remained entirely silent, making his best beneath the chair to blend into the shadows. Sadly, his refuge would be promptly despoiled. Extending his reach underneath the tabby's shelter, GT Ninety-Nine expertly snatched, by the scruff of his neck, the petrified feline. The agent's precise grip rendered the immense creature completely immobile and helpless.

Victoria Melbourne was not to permit the operative to kidnap her favourite playmate so easily. She emerged from her hiding place and leapt on to his back, with her arms around his neck, kicking at his posterior with her legs.

"You let Fatticus go!" she shouted repeatedly in his ear. GT Ninety-Nine only held his head back and laughed. This turn in events only provided a novel source of amusement to the agent, the man quite unaffected by the efforts of the young girl.

GT Ninety-Nine also obtained great mirth from both the name, and the outlandish appearance of the cat he had captured. Frock and bonnet still adorning Fatticus, the brigand began to remove the feline from the flat, taking the poor tabby away from his castle in the sky. He would deliver the creature to the scientific arm of the Feline Remote Intelligence Gathering Service, where they

would subject it to all manner of tests in order to determine if the animal was indeed as talented as the operative suspected.

“Now, see here,” exclaimed the still-gasping Doctor Brunswick as he confronted the man, cat held to his front and child remaining on his back, atop the third floor landing. “I cannot,” he continued haltingly, “permit you to depart with that creature.”

He stood firm at the head of the stairway, intent to block the kidnapper’s exit until further assistance arrived. They fought, briefly; the operative deftly defeated the feeble physician using only one hand, his other occupied with the obese Fatticus, who was desperately striving to free himself from the painful grasp that the man maintained upon his tender neck.

The spy cast the ineffective impediment aside effortlessly; then, he progressed down the stairway, exiting the building with cat firmly in hand, and girl fastened to his back. She screamed while he laughed, and the two vocalizations merged into a demented concerto.

Hans was waiting there, Mister Kao as well; this second German, who displayed an incessant smirk, urged the oriental gentleman at the behest of a pistol to remove the child from GT Ninety-Nine’s person. He did so; the greengrocer and the girl could then only stand and watch while the brute tossed Fatticus into a cage, present in the cargo area of an unassuming black van.

Pleased with their success, the two ruffians then made their rapid departure.

GT Ninety-Nine would laugh with Hans, while he drove them away from the scene of the abduction, speaking in German regarding the details of his feline extraction. The elderly man who had mistakenly blocked his path promptly emerged from the block of flats and, as he faded into the distance had shouted his desire for a rematch; this only served to provide further comedic material with which the two Germans would amuse themselves during their journey.

Only a few short moments later, Caroline Hawthorn would arrive at the scene. Her deepest fear was soon confirmed by a sombre Doctor Brunswick; she had tragically been too late. They had taken Fatticus, the only love she had left in the world, away; for reasons yet unknown, her precious feline had been removed by an anonymous, malicious entity to some nameless place.

The housekeeper and the doctor both worked as best as they were able to comfort the distraught woman, but there was very little that they could do to provide her with solace. Despite their assurances, only one awful truth remained.

Fatticus was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE BARN CAT AND THE OWL

ABOUT A WEEK PRIOR TO THOSE UNFORTUNATE EVENTS, Caroline had related another of the spontaneous tales to her typewriter.

The lazy autumn afternoon was a perfect time for Samuel, nestled in the hay far up in the loft of the barn that was his domain, to take a little nap. It had been a long, hot summer, and the weary feline had been forced, in an effort to discourage some rather persistent predators from making their meal of the chickens, to fight vigorously; he had also spent countless hours endeavouring to keep the stalls that housed the livestock, cows and horses free from a seeming plague of insects.

A gentle, cool breeze swept through the barn. The respite was welcomed by all of the animals but particularly by Samuel who, prepared to dream of endless fields of mice and limitless lakes of milk, settled into his slumber. As he drifted off to his ideal world however, he heard a faint noise.

The sound was not borne from his imagination; it was a familiar rustling, the clatter of a nearby rodent. He simply could not be bothered with it at present; Samuel would not abort his well-deserved relaxation for the sake of one miserable mouse. The seasoned hunter would later deal with the creature, and quite efficiently.

He made a gentle frolic around the idyllic cat park that resided within his feline mind; the cat captured a mouse or two, sampled the milk and then, in the long, dry straw of his imaginings, chased grasshoppers and garter snakes. Samuel could while away the entire afternoon in such fashion and, if given the choice, he would, the sentinel asleep in the loft above the barn, over which he had remained vigilant for his entire life.

The rustling of the rogue rodent continued, and threatened to intrude into his fantasies but he did his utmost to ignore it, and block its presence from his self-perceived utopia; Samuel would simply refuse to permit the irritation to ruin his perfect afternoon. He stretched, and the smoky-grey feline yawned before he resettled himself, and began to resume his daydreaming. The cat, in his efforts to keep the bothersome acoustic indications of mouse activity at bay, found success in resisting the instinctual urge to investigate and, vanquishing the impulses that would only serve to disrupt his drowsy undertakings, the afternoon quietly passed away.

A sharp noise had later then intruded; it was not the ceaseless rustle, but rather the distinctive squeal of a mouse in peril that had made its way from the world outside into the barn cat's playground. The rodent's shrieks had promptly awakened the feline from his slumber and, as he recognized the unmistakable sounds of flapping wings, he observed a bird fly easily from the barn through the wide space provided by the then fully open doors. The protestations of the terrified vermin quickly faded, until they were soon heard no further, into the distance of the late autumn afternoon.

Samuel was not quite certain what to make of this new element, or what consideration he should provide to this unfamiliar creature that had made an appearance inside of his barn unannounced, and then proceeded to make off with one of his mice. On the one hand, the bird had done him a favour; he could spend the remainder of the golden afternoon in peace and quiet, the irritation having been conveniently disposed of. On the other, he would have rather enjoyed a fresh, warm entrée at the conclusion of his recreational dozing; now, the cat may be forced, in order to satiate his hungered stomach, to contend with far less attractive fare.

Perhaps, Samuel mused, another such ill-fated rodent would make itself known to him before the sun moved to set. Satisfied with that speculated compromise he curled up, to soldier forth with his regimen of rest once again. He revisited his land of milk and mice, savouring all that his imagination had to offer him. The theft of his property by the unexpected visitor rapidly faded from the cat's mind; his slumber further devoid of any distractions, he concentrated upon enjoying the remains of his presently peaceful afternoon.

The sun began to approach the horizon, its rapid descent in the sky signalling the close to yet another day. Samuel was pleased to hear a return of the characteristic rustling; he decided, in exchange for a delicious delicacy to terminate his leisure early and began the slow, arduous process

of rousing himself into a return of his typical hunting form. The cat yawned and he stretched; in his efforts to resume awareness, he made no haste, slowly building the strength with which he would pursue the mouse that quite suddenly departed the barn courtesy of the repeatedly trespassing bird.

The entire affair had concluded in a matter of seconds. With the light of the setting harvest sun streaming forth from behind it, the bird had flown in; the crimson beams illuminated the creature as if it were a phoenix composed of fire. Using some undetermined talent to pinpoint the precise location of its target, hidden beneath the piles of grass and hay, the predator had made its swoop down, and over the straw strewn across the floor far below.

The unwary mouse promptly and masterfully secured in its talons the bird then, banking as it did so, performed a steep ascent. It glided from the barn, its treasure firmly in hand, subsequently removing it from the reaches of the astonished cat.

By her most recent discovery, the owl was rather impressed. She had arrived there the previous night; the site was initially just one stop of many during her prolonged search for another place in which to settle. Her old residence had been destroyed by humanity who, in order to erect their own strange structure, chose to chop down her home.

The odd-shaped structure appeared to be, with prey for her to harvest, rather well stocked; it seemingly contained a veritable hive of mice. There was a minor menace in attendance; a feline marauder that she would have to observe carefully resided within. However, she was certain that it would pose no serious threat. Cats were relatively unintelligent animals; their movements and actions were rather simple to foresee.

Indeed, those creatures' behaviours were almost as straightforward to predict as deducing the whereabouts, under a blanket of straw, of a mouse.

On the proceeds of her latest find, she could easily sustain herself throughout the looming winter; the owl had settled in the high branches of a nearby tree, one sufficiently near to the den of rodentry for culinary convenience, but far enough removed from the reaches of the potentially troublesome feline that tended to them. The owl was certain to be both safe there, and well fed; she would survive the approaching poor weather comfortably, as the sheltered mice served during the dark frigid season to nourish her.

The cat however was distinctly unimpressed. The pilfering of the first mouse he could forgive, but the heist of the second proved to be a major slight for Samuel; it was entirely inexcusable and, that he would permit such an outrageous event to occur for a third time, there was absolutely no possibility.

He may have granted a small measure of respect to the bird for its demonstrated expertise in hunting mice, but they were his rodents and their ownership was absolute. He feared that, if left to its own devices, the rogue would completely decimate the rodent population, having previously been carefully maintained by the feline at a manageable level.

Should it be allowed to continue its activities unimpeded, he could literally find himself soon, by the voracious winged assassin, eaten out of mouse and home. He could not allow such a circumstance to occur. This would be, quite plainly and simply, war; the cat would defend his stable of snacks to the death, if necessary. However, he was confident that he would prevail; the bird would prove no match for his superior intelligence, and the campaign would be over in a matter of days, if even that.

Samuel, as he scrounged some kibble from beneath his empty supper bowl, began to architect his plans for battle; his tendencies for aggression were inflamed by the unfulfilling blandness of his less preferred sustenance.

The feline, incited by his dissatisfied appetite, shortly howled a poignant call to arms.

Closure of the main barn doors had made the cat feel himself a tad more at ease. The impediment would serve to make it much more difficult for his adversary to achieve such unrestricted entries, and unimpeded escapes. The bird would be forced to enter the barn through the ventilation opening high above the main doors, up in the loft; Samuel would then be provided with the chance to state his desire for the pillaging of his mice to cease, his strongly worded request to be punctuated with claws and teeth.

The nocturnal hunter had no desire to pilfer the barn that evening; her belly had been filled with her two-stage breakfast to bursting. Instead, the owl, content in the knowledge that her requirements had finally been met and she need wander no further, would spend the following twilight hours in quiet contemplation, revisiting all of the sights that during her travels of the last several months she had encountered.

He stood watch until, the bird apparently opting to make no further appearances, he became too fatigued and then took to his bed for

the night, to consider what such a creature must taste like, and contemplate upon how much satisfaction he would obtain by removing the flying vermin from the sky.

Morning came and, while the owl slept the cat, unaware of the greatly divergent slumber pattern his enemy followed readied himself for the conflict that was certain to be inevitable. The doors remained firmly shut that day; Samuel need only wait patiently for the bird to fly through the tempting, remaining opening, and into the loft. Then, he would have it; he would pounce upon the creature and, the feline's brief campaign resulting in a quick victory, pull it from the air.

As the afternoon pondered laboriously and uneventfully forward, the cat grew rather exhausted; before long, his yearnings for sleep pulled at him with an almost irresistible force. Regardless, he would not succumb for he must stay awake; the stealthy burglar could choose any moment to make its appearance. However, it began to appear to Samuel as if the bird would never arrive; he began to consider that perhaps it had departed and, the creature to never again harass the cat or his precious mice, flown off to points elsewhere. In such a case, having a little nap to celebrate this development would certainly be in order.

It was subsequently concluded that the bird had indeed gone, and therefore the cat had won.

Having thoroughly convinced himself that the crisis was over, the cat settled down on his preferred place of slumber to travel once again amongst his tasty fields of mice and delicious lakes of milk, whilst partaking in lengthy pursuits of both grasshoppers and garter snakes. He was pleased; his supplementary food supply was no longer in jeopardy, and to be further consumed only by him, at his discretion alone. Sadly, it was to be a wonderful, but unrealistic notion; while the cat dreamt, the owl glided silently through the undefended aperture, swooped down quietly and secured her completely oblivious repast.

The resounding complaints raised by the mouse were, until it was forced to noisily flap its wings in order to affect its escape, the only indications given to the slumbering feline of the bird's intrusion. By the time Samuel had succeeded in reviving himself, all he could do was gaze mournfully through the inappropriately exploited exit and, as another of his prized rodents was carried off by the shameless barnstormer, look on in disappointment.

There were simply not enough mice to go around, not for both the cat and the bird; a doubling of consumption would soon render the barn's

mouse population completely extinct. Samuel would refuse any notion of defeat; he would not surrender his mice to the foul phoenix, nor would he permit their numbers to plummet to nought. There was no compromise here; only one outcome was possible. He would dispatch the bird tomorrow; the cat, having been made painfully aware of his adversary's schedule knew that, in the following, late afternoon, he could expect it to make another appearance.

She would catch another mouse just before she went to sleep. The owl did not wish to furnish the cat with the circumstance to predict her next call to its hay-laden buffet table. It was prudent to vary the timing of her visits. The cat had been sleeping, but it would likely be awake on other occasions and be given the chance to attack her. All she was required to do was keep her meal times somewhat variable; then, such an outcome would be unnecessary.

The owl was quite convinced that there were plenty of mice for all. If the cat took offence to her sharing in such abundance, then it was merely demonstrating its selfish nature. She would not abscond with more of the rodents than what was necessary for her survival; the owl was not greedy, and it would be better if the cat grew to attain an awareness of that fact.

Unfortunately, she had, regarding the cat's ability to properly assess the situation, rather low expectations and was concerned that, if able, it would violently confront her; this recognition provided great motivation for the owl to avoid an encounter with the clawed and fanged simpleton.

Samuel found himself foiled once again. The source of his consternation had arrived as he slept deeply, the rooster having not yet stirred to sound its daily alarm, during the dim light of early dawn. The brigand had flown in, directly past his slumbering eyes, stolen its rodent bounty and then, without so much as a how-do-you-do, left. The entire matter, at that point had progressed from a minor slight into a major affront, the feline quite infuriated that this inconsiderate animal had persisted to demonstrate, by showing absolutely no regard for his authority over the barn, a complete lack of respect for the cat.

The cat felt that he might be forced to assume a course of more direct action, and pay his own unannounced visit to the bird's arboreal sanctuary.

He had observed the bird fly to the tree; the flight to its destination required several minutes. The refuge was quite a distance away, a great deal farther than Samuel had ever travelled, the cat having only once left

the protective confines of the fence that surrounded both the barn, and the house in which the humans resided. A fearsome beast had nearly done away with him on that occasion; it had proven to be a terrible mistake to venture out alone. He had no desire to repeat the experience, and confront the possibility of his own demise.

The cat faced quite the conundrum. He could continue to attempt to catch the bird using his current, if rather ineffective methods, any success with which was likely to take some time to obtain if it was ever to be had at all. Alternatively, he could choose to take the conflict to the bird and, whilst traversing the treacherous plain, risk providing a banquet for a predator. Finally, Samuel could simply relent and, as he passively stood aside, permit the bird to take whatever it desired, choosing instead to make a gift of his mice to the one who would have merely persisted upon raiding them.

One would think that some deep consideration of the subject would be required; however, a few more impromptu visitations on the part of the bird easily persuaded the cat to prepare for a hazardous attempt at crossing the prairie. His anger rapidly approached critical mass, and the situation could be tolerated no longer by the furious feline.

He determined that, long after the sun had set, he would creep towards the tree. The bird would be asleep, he reasoned and vulnerable to an attack; as well, the night would protect him, its darkness shrouding him from the eyes of the enormous beasts that patrolled the plain. His brilliant plan, he was certain, would be implemented with little difficulty.

Twilight approached; the cat soon set off towards the tree that, to his sworn enemy, provided shelter and to the one who had seen fit to intrude upon his Heavenly existence, transforming it into a living Hell. He would make the bird serve penance for the crimes that it had committed, and exact retribution for its sins; it would never trouble Samuel, or his mice, ever again.

The feline crept slowly closer to his target, keeping himself concealed beneath the tall grass and, in an effort to ensure that he remained without an audience, making his best performance. This artist considered himself to be a professional.

The owl, having easily spotted the creature soon after it had departed from the barn, contemplated upon its journey towards her with great amusement. The cat appeared to have aspirations involving its ascent of her tree, its effort apparently intended to lead to her capture. It

was a completely absurd notion, particularly when one considered that she was quite wide-awake, and conscious of its activities.

Watching the creature merely served to pass the time; she presumed that it would eventually reach the tree, make the climb and then, when it discovered its 'prey' was not there, suffer severe distress. She would go pay a visit to the roof of the mouse-infested structure until the fur-bearing animal abandoned the undertaking, and returned to its domicile. There would be some hilarity, once the cat realized what had transpired, and the absolute futility of its efforts dawned upon it.

She was not a cruel owl, but she just failed to comprehend why the feline would take such offence to her endeavour merely to survive. It deserved to be taught some humility. The cat would be schooled to leave her be, and allow her to pursue her natural right to sustain her life through the winter.

The cat, in the meantime inched, whilst visualizing his planned assault on the avian fortress and its occupant, slowly closer to his target. He made complicated calculations involving his future movements, the feline completely ignorant of the enormous beasts proceeding toward him from the horizon that had caught his scent. Had he been aware of them, he might have chosen that moment to turn and run, fleeing back to the safety of the barn before the monsters overtook him, but he was not and, as such, failed to do so.

Samuel, unaware of the imminent, deadly danger that he faced, instead carried on his cursed path.

The owl, however noticed the beasts promptly, and realized their lethal implication quite quickly. This development would certainly solve her problem. She would no longer have cause to worry that the feline might be given the ability to injure her. As well, that the cat would meet its demise while moving to hasten hers would be rather ironic, and she would take in its misfortune some perverse pleasure.

Then again, the cat would not be in such a predicament if she had not decided to stay there, if the owl had instead carried on with her search, and left the feline to hoard his mice. As such, the bird was in the slightest part liable for the approaching slaughter. Regarding that, there could be little question, but due to its stubborn nature and primitive inability to simply share the abundance, her adversary held some of the blame also.

In conclusion, the owl saw absolutely no justification for any argument to feel compassion for the self-interested mammal, a creature that would itself rather see her starve.

Samuel, still completely clueless regarding the rather gruesome fate that awaited him, continued his trek towards the bird that he loathed so much. He was wholly dedicated to his task, and blissfully ignorant of any other details. Had he been, to the world about him, paying better attention the cat might have realized the threat, and made a frantic charge back to the farmyard and the safety of his barn. However, his hate had consumed him, and rendered him incapable of any actions other than those required to satisfy his murderous obsession for the owl.

It seemed to the bird as if the imminent proceedings had already come to their inescapable finality. Her adversary would meet his end. One would think that it would give the owl fine cause to rejoice, but rather her sense of guilt began to foster an uncertainty in her resolve. She argued with herself that she ought not to celebrate the ghastly occasion.

Her conscience contended that she had invaded its home, after all. Perhaps the cat, even though it hoarded all of those rodents to itself was correct to be angry towards the owl's arbitrary actions. She was forced to admit that she had been quite rude; it really was no mystery that the feline would desire to be rid of her. As well, her portrayal of the creature as selfish as justification for her own illicit activities had been equally petty, and insincere.

Truthfully, there was no distinct right or wrong side; each had been acting purely in its own self-interest.

Meanwhile, the advancing feline had passed the point of no return. There was no conceivable way he would be permitted to reach either the tree or the barn before his hunters would overtake him. He was condemned; the cat, his fury and rage towards the owl blinding him to anything but his own dark purpose, was already lost to an enemy he had still failed to realize existed.

Samuel was certain that he would soon make his destination, and he would gleefully take his frustration out on its source. He would have his desperately required satisfaction; with that, nothing could interfere.

Unless the owl intervened, the cat would surely die. There was a strong moral argument for her to engage in such action, but the overwhelming instinct of self-preservation was also to be considered. Quite a debate took place within the owl's mind, each side presenting its case

with a rather solid argument. One barrister implored to be rid of the feline, for it was naught but a menace; her own needs took precedence, and they would be well served by his demise.

She was almost convinced, however the opposing counsel then inconveniently noted that the cat did not deserve such a horrid fate, one that the owl had herself set in motion. The execution would be a crime to which she would be, at a minimum, an accomplice and at the most, she could be accused of direct participation.

As her deliberations continued, the cat continued his advance upon the tree, and the beasts persisted in their pursuit of the feline. The owl was simply unable to make up her mind; her internal jury remained hopelessly deadlocked on the matter. Regardless, she would be required to make a decision soon.

Her heart eventually entered an opinion; the tie-breaking voice spoke of compassion, empathy and equity. She made her verdict; the bird would aid her adversary to live in the way she demanded that it assist her. She resolved, no matter what the immediate or future risks were in doing so, to be accountable for the circumstances she had brought about; despite the potential consequences, it was simply not ethical to allow the cat to perish in this fashion.

The owl, a matter of moments before they would have reached their prey, distracted the beasts; in the process, the cat was alerted to their ominous presence, providing him with an opportunity to flee back to the barn, and the safety within it. He was surprised by the action that the bird had taken and, the creature's empathy emboldening his own compassion in kind, he was given pause to think.

Perhaps, he pondered as he ran for his life, there might be sufficient mice to go around, after all.

The growls of the monsters, as they carried on with their wasted effort to capture the owl, were the happiest sounds that the cat had ever heard. While they receded into the distance, he realized a newfound appreciation for the brazen bird that had deigned to save him.

Soon, daylight emerged. Thoroughly exhausted by the previous night's events the cat, in his place up in the loft of the barn, slept peacefully. A loud screech roused him abruptly to reality and, still quite anxious from his near escape the evening before, the feline took to his feet.

The bird was found to be perched in the opening above the loft, awaiting his permission to enter. Promptly soliciting his immediate reply, she emitted a second cry.

The cat relaxed when he realized it was she, his saviour and new friend, the owl. He lay down and, in a sign of trust, rolled slightly to display his tender underside; she accepted his de-facto invitation to enter his domain, the barn. Samuel had decided that, in return for saving his life, he would share his mice; she, in turn had developed a method by which she could provide the cat with the respect he deserved whilst keeping her own needs satisfactorily fulfilled.

The owl suddenly swooped down, into the depths of the barn and then, with a mouse in her claw to present in tribute to the cat that reigned over his kingdom of rodents, quickly returned. Samuel was suitably impressed. The offering was graciously accepted.

His ego was satisfied, and his stomach even more so.

Proper consideration having since been given, the owl flew down again; this time, she secured her own meal, and then returned to the loft above to enjoy it, with her new feline friend, in what was to be her new home. The duo would make an unlikely, but happy pair of comrades, the barn cat and the owl.

A minor correction must be made to that last statement; the two were, from then on, the barn's cat and owl.

At the conclusion of the tale, there stood another cryptic message.

Watermelons love caterpillars and dance with donkeys.

Caroline had chuckled to herself as she had read the curio; she wondered if they waltzed, or did the Charleston.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE CASE OF THE PURLOINED PUSSYCAT

SCOTLAND YARD HAD BEEN CONTACTED. Doctor Brunswick had seen to it immediately following Caroline Hawthorn's return. However, despite the dire importance that the physician had placed upon the present circumstances, the Yard did not particularly consider the complaint to be an urgent case, leaving the doctor with the challenge of mounting a preliminary investigation on his own.

There certainly seemed to be some legitimacy to Missus Hawthorn's extraordinary claims. That a third party would engage in such efforts to kidnap what ought to be seen as merely a common house cat did tend to indicate that the perpetrators were themselves convinced the animal was far less than ordinary. Brunswick took to examining the door and, finding no oddities with it, was forced to conclude at least tentatively that Fatticus did indeed possess the ability to traverse such objects, and that he had been stolen for said talent.

The 'why' having been answered, the questions focused on the 'who', the 'what' and the 'where;' that is, who exactly were these men, where were they taking the poor defenceless creature and what were they intending to do with him when they got there. He had seen the 'who;' the man was tall and wide, but not visibly muscular, possessing a long, scarred face with a crooked nose, his dark eyes proudly displaying his menace to all who cared to observe it.

Despite his average physical appearance, the intruder had swept Brunswick aside as if he was a mere annoyance, a minor pest. The man's abilities were obviously professional in nature. He could have been a thug for hire, a soldier of fortune employed by an anonymous entity seeking to exploit the cat for his own mysterious ends, or perhaps he was acting as a mercenary, who would sell the extraordinary feline on the open market to the highest bidder.

Caroline had been able to briefly compose herself, and she informed Brunswick of the kidnapper's presence outside the building earlier that morning; the author also told the physician of the hooligan's prior visit to her publisher.

It seemed to the doctor that, for the criminals to have such an interest, there must be some connection between the cat and Missus Hawthorn's writings. It appeared as if her words had tipped them to the presence of the seemingly mystical creature.

Conceivably, he considered, a more thorough examination of the peculiar passages would yield some further clues.

Whilst the doctor set about his amateur detective work, Caroline Hawthorn returned to her prior condition, that of a dazed silence. The young girl, Victoria, had been sent home and Missus Tottenham remained, to do whatever she could to comfort and console the devastated woman; the housekeeper herself nursed a nasty blow to the head that had been delivered by the evil coward who had taken away their Fatticus.

A broomstick or a cane, that is all Missus Tottenham, if she were presented with the opportunity to confront the man again, would require; she would 'give him the business' and teach him, in regard to his foul behaviour, a painful lesson.

The author was no longer angry, or even upset. She was simply lost, marooned in the same manner that she had been when the soldier had come to inform her, and when she had learned, that her husband had been killed. The woman became absent to all including herself, present but yet not; her consciousness retreated, due to a complete inability to accept the reality that had been laid before her, into the asylum of her own mind.

She was alone, following the War for many years; the widow had been utterly immersed in her isolation, and consumed by her silent despair. This most recent loss had merely served to return her to that empty place once again.

Caroline could not fathom how they would ever recover her precious Fatticus. The police obviously had no particular concern regarding the 'theft of cat', nor was there even the slightest shred of useful information with which to pursue his kidnappers. Other than simple descriptions of the perpetrator, his accomplice and their undistinguished mode of transport there was nothing particularly identifiable; the doctor had noted the license number of the vehicle, but it could be reasonably assumed that either the plate, or the van itself, had been stolen.

It was all she could manage to absently nod, while Doctor Brunswick puffed furiously on his pipe and, as to the extent of the conspiracy in addition to

the faceless entities behind it, verbally brainstormed his conjecture. His fantastical ideas, about secret government agencies and clandestine corporations, were too radical, even for her. For all she knew, an enthusiast of obese ginger-tabbies had merely desired to add Fatticus to their collection. The perpetrator could be anyone, but their identity did not particularly matter to her, the author's only real concern being that her cat was missing.

Fatticus had vanished, disappeared into a cage that resided within the cargo area of a van, itself somewhere on a less-travelled road leading away from London. It moved toward the base of operations for GT Ninety-Nine and Hans, that of the Feline Remote Intelligence Gathering Service.

The operative had been regaling his companion with his epic tale of break, enter and theft, then they had then sung old German folk songs whilst poor Fatticus became progressively queasier. Completely unaccustomed to vehicular travel, he was rapidly developing an acute case of motion sickness.

*"Now comes the merry summertime, the hours full of joy and endless delight.
We leave behind our home, we freely, gladly roam,
So happy to be in the warm sunlight.*

*The meadows glow with the deepest green, and blossoms bright on the hedgerows lie.
Sweet music fills the air; the joyful lark is there.
How quickly do the days of summer fly.*

*As long as days are sunny and warm, and nights are all aglow as the stars prevail,
We'll dance the whole day long, we'll spend our time in song
Of summer, wondrous as a fairytale."*

The cat, in a concerted effort to register his numerous complaints regarding the whole affair, began to howl. He wished to be returned home, to his castle in the sky with his fair Lady Caroline and not be here, with these rude humans that had treated him in such an inappropriate fashion. Therefore, he sang his own song; it was a cry of distress and a dirge of sorrow, a tone-deaf melody of swiftly increasing nausea.

He wailed long, loud and off-key; he prayed that his Lady Caroline would hear it and, his companion rescuing him from this nightmare he had been thrust into so forcefully, come to his aid.

It was one of the most terrible noises the two ex-patriot Germans had ever been suffered to hear, and GT Ninety-Nine, in particular had listened, throughout his less-than-illustrious career, to some rather vile sounds. They took turns ordering the cat to cease his terrible activity, directing their voices towards the rear of their van in a verbal effort to convince the feline, using both crude German and English vernacular, to keep his mouth shut.

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There was, on both sides, a rapid escalation of hostilities; Fatticus rose, to an excruciating pitch, his expression of distress whilst the men, with the sound of their own raucous voices, endeavoured to drown the cat out. There quickly came such a point where Hans, unable to tolerate any more of the feline's crooning, rotated in his seat. The man prepared to journey into the back of the van, and convince the cat a little more physically to discontinue his unwanted serenade.

Hans then paused, and his constant smirk promptly changed into an expression of disbelief. "The cat," he stuttered, to the motoring GT Ninety-Nine, "the cat, he is out of the cage."

"You cannot be serious." GT Ninety-Nine turned and, at the shaken Hans, gazed dubiously, as if he were completely daft. "That is simply impossible." He carefully leaned his head around his chair, and was surprised to see that, indeed, the frocked ginger-tabby was no longer trapped within his prison, but rather free to negotiate about the van at his leisure.

How this had happened, the operative could only speculate. The cage was quite secure, and when he had fastened the bolts that locked the animal inside, he paid careful attention. Still, there the cat was, no longer bound by his steel constraints.

How Fatticus, to the confines of his prison had become no longer restrained was a mystery even to him. He had been briefly interested in a moth that had fluttered temptingly around the interior of the van. Perhaps he had taken a leap toward it; the feline was uncertain. The vertigo, with its endless spinning was confounding his memory. The cat felt as if he was continuously revolving, and that motion was making him extremely ill.

Much to the tabby's further discomfort, the vehicle had frequently lurched and jumped suddenly. Possibly, when one of those events had taken him unawares, he had left the cage. Regardless of any of that, the plain truth was he really did not care. His only concern was that he was rather terribly unwell.

Had he been able to send a telegram to his captors, it might well have been as follows.

STANDARD TELEGRAM

Dear Sirs. STOP

I insist you cease your activities at once. STOP

Your compliance is appreciated. STOP

Fatticus. STOP

Unfortunately, he could not communicate with them in such a succinct fashion, and as such, he instead resumed his rousing rendition of 'God Save the Cat.'

The operative, having personally witnessed its magical transference through the oaken door of the author woman's flat, had his own notions regarding the cat's leaving of it's cage. There could be some difficulty, if it should choose to exit through the wood panels that comprised the exterior of the van, in maintaining possession of his prize; that could, in terms of delivering a live, functioning feline to the scientists at the F.R.I.G.S. facility, prove quite problematic.

There could be no such failure in his operation; he would be proven truthful, and that infuriating Carlton would be made to, GT Ninety-Nine believed the expression to be, 'eat his words.'

Logically speaking, it would be in their best interests to return the stout, bonnet-sporting tabby to it's prison. If the cat were back within the bars it, at the very least, would be forced to conduct two separate excursions through solid matter in order to escape the van entirely. The operative pondered upon the issue for a moment, and then made his decision, pulling their vehicle over to the side of the road along a wooded section of the motor-way, in order that Hans could re-secure their loose cargo away from prying eyes.

Hans had an unsettling sensation that this would not go well for him; however, there was to be no convincing his companion of that. He pleaded with GT Ninety-Nine to accompany him to the back of the van, and provide him with assistance in handling the heavy animal, but all the operative would do was to tease the unfortunate man about his inferiority, and make jests regarding his 'irrational' fear of a tame, timid pussycat. Hans had, some years previous, painfully learned the propensity these animals had for causing serious injury, and certainly did not wish to take any such risks now. Sadly, GT Ninety-Nine steadfastly insisted that he tend to the creature alone.

Fatticus, whilst the uneasy gentleman opened the rear entrance to the van, studied Hans intensely; the animal emitted a 'snough,' and the human quickly recognized the look in the cat's cobalt eyes, one that he was aware heralded his impending doom. Hans, as to what horrific acts the ginger terror was preparing to inflict upon him, had a fairly reasonable notion and, pleading with the quiver in his jaw for the feline not to follow through with his dastardly threats, he thrust his arms upward in an expression of total surrender.

Unhappily, it was, for any such petition far too late as the antithesis of gaunt had already proceeded to utilize Hans as a ladder. His sharp claws gaining purchase upon tender human skin, the plump tabby struggled to climb the man's

torso, mounting his shoulder and then, to slow the feline's descent to the ground below, abused his back.

A brief moment passed in horrified silence, and then the cat was gone. The tabby charged, as fast as his legs could carry his furry bulk towards the trees, and soon ran into the forest that bordered upon the motorway. Fatticus would have no further part of those awful men or their horrid contraption. He demanded to go home; he wanted to eat his kibble, sleep on his bed and have his Lady Caroline pet him in the manner that he preferred. Consequently, he hastened forward, bonneted and frocked, through the woodland in no particular direction; his heading was only that which led away from where the feline had been before.

GT Ninety-Nine, as his battered man remained with his arms erected whilst the self-liberated ginger-tabby affected his escape, slowly shook his head towards the aggrieved associate with feigned pity.

"Jolly good show," he applauded sarcastically; then, raising his eyebrows and pursing his lips he repeated, with a quiet anger, "Jolly good show indeed, old chap."

Hans, bleeding from several dozen cat-induced pinpricks moved painfully to the front of the van. His superior adept at various methods of corporal punishment, the assistant's perforated body readily anticipated, in the clutches of the less-than-satisfied operative, further mistreatment.

That day had not been kind to Hans. Perhaps, it had merely been typical of his entire life. Regardless, he cursed it anyhow.

The police did eventually attend, early in the evening, to the author's flat. They took statements from all of those concerned, but the Detective Inspector had to agree with Missus Hawthorn that there was little chance of recovering the 'stolen property,' that of the purloined tabby. There had been nothing uniquely identifying about the thief; he had wisely worn gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints, and a verbal description was very little with which an investigation could proceed.

If they did happen to stop a black van with such individuals and a frock-clad ginger-tabby within then, they would certainly make some inquiries, but the occurrence of such an event was terribly unlikely.

The visit was not a complete waste of his time. Some of the theories proposed by a certain Doctor Brunswick to the Detective Inspector regarding the motives behind the crime had been rather entertaining. Featuring tabbies that teleported and psychically induced writings, they contained all the ingredients of an engaging fantasy novel. He did not doubt the sincerity of the witnesses, or the

authenticity of the crime itself; regardless, the physician's strange conjecture regarding the case definitely resided on the bizarre end of the investigative spectrum.

The policeman could only inform the Doctor that, if his strange notions were proven true, and the abduction was indeed the result of a complex conspiracy, it would merely further increase the odds of finding the animal against them.

That it had been the act of an obsessed fanatic would be a much more preferable scenario. The best Missus Hawthorn could hope for would be that the crime intended some further attempt at ransom, and that the kidnappers would eventually make contact with her in order to organize an exchange of feline for funds. Were that to occur, the Yard would aid in facilitating the transaction, and then endeavour to track down the criminals.

Until such a situation came about there was, quite frankly, very little assistance they could offer to the burgled novelist, her irate doctor or her maligned housekeeper.

The Detective Inspector bid them all a better evening and, with a rather good tale to relate to his colleagues, left the flat. If it were true, it would be an even more exceptional anecdote.

Meanwhile, the miserable Fatticus was very cold, quite lost and rather sad. First, this place possessed no sustenance for the misplaced tabby; it contained only green and brown pieces of unidentified material that provided absolutely no appeal to his hunger-stricken innards. Second, he had never been so chilly in his life; it felt as if the frost had proceeded into his bones, and his skeleton was composed of ice. Finally, the cat, unaccompanied in this strange land, was so incredibly lonely; that was the least tolerable burden of all.

There was no rain, and no snow; the ground was barren and dry, but it was still no night for a pampered, clothed pussycat to be out of doors. Not only was it bitterly frigid, the moonlight made it a convenient time for nomadic predators to make, from whatever poor creatures happened to chance into their gaze, an easy meal.

A plump, ginger-haired, frocked feline would certainly fall into such a grouping.

To make matters even worse Fatticus, having injured a paw during his bold departure, possessed a slight limp; it was forcing his gait to carry him somewhat off to the right. The unsuspecting animal was going around in circles.

Meanwhile, the doctor and the housekeeper, each having other needs to be attended to, were soon required to depart from the flat; both promised to

make frequent contact with Caroline, in order to be apprised of any developments in the case. She smiled weakly whilst she escorted them out; then, the woman lit a candle and, as she had done for her husband while he had been away at war, placed it in her window. The writer was quite certain that her poor, lost pussycat was currently fighting a grave battle of his own.

“Come home, Fatticus,” Caroline sighed sadly, “please, just come home.”

She did not drink any wine, for her heart was not in it and, having been abandoned by the man in her life for a third time, went to bed.

The operative formerly known as Fritz, and his bumbling associate Hans, scoured the neighbourhoods around the woods for their runaway captive while Fatticus, as frightened as he had ever been, clambered into a hollow beneath the boughs of a tree, and settled himself in for the night. It was difficult for him to make the transition to slumber; the sounds of the forest frequently startled him, and their menace kept him alert, but eventually his fatigue overtook him. His fear and hunger were cast aside; he drifted off, falling into the land of dreams, and the realm of nightmares.

It was empty there; there was nothing, not a single, imaginary soul. He had entered the representation of his worst fear; it was a void, where he was trapped within a complete absence of everything. There was no kibble, nor a bowl to put it in, or a floor to put it on. It contained no humans, no mice and no bed. The worst conceivable fate for this most needy, materialistic cat was to strand him in a wasteland of nothingness, devoid of all but that principle subject.

He howled, his talent reaching new heights, the feline expressing more sadness in his rumination than anyone could bear to hear. Mournfully, he was crying only to himself.

It may be that was not entirely true; Fatticus shortly sensed there was another cat present, one that he had spent some time with there in his dreams before.

“Young one, what is the matter,” the other cat questioned by nuzzling up against the forlorn Fatticus, and attempting to comfort him. “Have you become lost?”

He related his traumatic tale to his slumber-induced vision. His imagining was that of another ginger tabby, but a female, and much older than him. He wept, whilst he detailed his vast sense of hopelessness to her, his ghostly friend, and took solace in her presence. At least in his dreams he was not alone.

The other feline behaved strangely for an invention of his fantasy. This was not the sort of simple companion that Fatticus was accustomed to meeting in his slumber. She seemed to comprehend what he had conveyed to her, and even

recognize some of what he had described. His alter-tabby even became oddly curious. He was asked to explore his memories of when he was a kitten, to focus upon his mother and mentally revisit the place in which he had been born.

The recollections raised his spirits, and his adventures were fondly recalled to this tourist of his remembering. Then, the visitor made a startling revelation. She knew where the place he was raised could be found, as she had known his mother and saw it through her eyes.

She showed Fatticus in his dreamscape how he would travel there, comprehensively describing the path that, when he awoke, he would need to follow. It was the way to safety, to the protection of the old woman who loved him so very much. Fatticus profusely expressed his gratitude; then, he prepared himself to awake, and depart upon his plotted path.

There was no longer anything upon which he need further distress, for he would be returned to his Lady Caroline soon enough, and resume his life within the castle in the sky. He had only one concluding enquiry, which he posed to his saviour; he wished, after all of the time they had previously spent together, to finally know her name.

"Cleopawtra," she answered before vanishing, and leaving him to the emptiness that he so despised.

The cat struggling to quickly revisit reality, he then swiftly left that foul place, awakening in the dark. With the assistance of the moonlight, he gained his bearings and made haste for his sanctuary. Fatticus strove for the light; following the map that Cleopawtra had drawn for him in his dream, he made a mad dash for the eerie glow in the distance and, pillar to post, his journey progressed into the early morning. Fatigue soon crushing him under its immense weight, his advance slowed. His destination crawled only inches closer with each arduous step.

The constable walked through his designated neighbourhood on his early morning patrol. No threats chose to present themselves, and disturb the sacred peace that was the break of dawn. He chuckled as he recalled to himself the story he had heard earlier on the telephone in his police box, the tale of the frock wearing tabby and the secret government conspiracy to abduct it. It was quite the work of fiction, but had really set him upon his purpose.

The report told of telepathic cats, tabbies passing through doors as if they were not there and secret codes, printed in children's magazines; it was promising material for a day full of interesting discussion. He was eager to make his rounds, and share the account with the locals.

A black van slowly made its way past the policeman for, he noted, the third time since sunrise had broken. The occupants appeared to be searching for something they had lost; however, they struck the officer as the sort that was more likely to be engaging in illegal activities. He decided to question the men. Whilst blowing his whistle and ordering the men to stop, he moved to follow after them.

They failed to concede to his insistent request and, the constable racing on foot after them with the best pace he could manage, instead sped off.

Quite unexpectedly, up on the cobblestones ahead, a creature leapt from the bushes that fringed the forest beyond. The policeman could scarcely believe his own eyes; on first inspection, the animal appeared to be an awfully obese, ginger-haired tabby cat, wearing a gown of lace and velvet, in addition to a blue bonnet with a bow.

The braking lamps on the rear of the van signalled its immediate halt, and the two men of suspicious appearance hurriedly emerged from it. Consequently, the pair took chase after the cat. The constable was taken aback; this must be the feline, and these had to be the characters he had been told of in the preposterous police box call. They were quite real and presently there.

The policeman pursued the lot of them, while calling upon them to halt and, in an attempt to summon further aid, blowing his whistle. Down the street, they ran; the denizens of the neighbourhood emerged on to their porches to witness the spectacle of the cat, the criminals and the constable.

Suddenly, the cat, diverting towards the footpath that led to one of the more distinguished homes that resided upon the avenue, made a sharp left turn. The older woman on the porch appeared to acknowledge and welcome the peculiar creature, and she urged it hurriedly inside.

The two men that hounded the feline scurried like rats onto her front step, and demanded they be permitted to follow the cat into the house; it was a request that the woman, meeting an attempt at forced entry with the response of a well-aimed skillet, sternly denied.

They protested, when he eventually arrived to the constable. The pair argued that the cat was their property, and it should be returned to them, promptly.

Although quite certain that it was not their animal, the constable could not risk a violent confrontation with such dangerous men; surrendering the feline to them was an option briefly taken into consideration. Fortunately, the old woman obligingly spared him from any such conflict by firmly stating that she did indeed own the cat in question.

“Fatticus,” she declared, “is most certainly my cat.”

The apparently familiar name prompted, in the faces of the two men, a crestfallen expression. Incapable of further disputing the claim of the staunch Scotswoman the pair, lest the policeman be forced to make further enquiries into their activities, was asked to move along. It was an order to which, reluctantly returning to their van they grudgingly complied, and subsequently drove away.

“That is not actually your cat,” the constable posed with a wry smile to the highly regarded Missus Glenferrie after the ruffians had departed. “Now, is it?”

“Aye,” she replied, a happy twinkle in her eye. “Actually, he is.”

She paused, and then reflected thoughtfully. “He has just been away,” she emphasized, “for a very long time.”

The policeman nodded in understanding and then, in complete confidence that what the well-respected woman said was the truth, chose to carry on.

In proud possession of this most-recent chapter of the strange tale of the tabby, the constable left from the scene. The addendum was soon to be told to all who would listen at the other end of the telephone in his police box.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE CAT CAME BACK

"I AM AFRAID YOUR MOTHER IS GONE, EDWARD," Missus Glenferrie told the troublesome, but very welcome tabby that once again graced her kitchen with his presence; "Ginger passed away two years ago."

She presented the famished cat with a dish of cream, which then eagerly proceeded to lap it up; the tabby savoured every drop as if each was the best he had ever tasted.

"Fancy you in a frock, mind you, I would certainly like to hear the story behind that." She laughed; the housekeeper was overjoyed by the unexpected visit paid by her prodigal feline son but, as to why such vile men had chosen to pursue him, was also rather concerned.

Missus Glenferrie wondered what had become of the woman who had adopted Fatticus. The cat certainly did not appear to be homeless; he was quite well fed, and even fashionably dressed. His dispossession had to have occurred somewhat recently. She was quite certain that the author, whose name took a few moments for the woman to recall, Caroline if her memory served, would be searching for her lost ginger-tabby.

The old woman struggled with her attempt to remember Caroline's surname, but was unsuccessful; perhaps, she thought, Fatticus's guardian would have the wisdom to look for the cat there. Until that time, the Scotswoman would keep her fur-bearing guest safe; she swore it to God as she provided the contented feline with some much-needed attention.

Hans and GT Ninety-Nine meanwhile had made their retreat and, within the darkness of a movie house, were presently regrouping. The operative, his operation having been foiled so unexpectedly, was exceedingly annoyed. That they had located the cat had certainly been a rather positive development, and not even the presence of the neighbourhood policeman would have hindered their recapture of the feline.

No one could have predicted that the animal would prove able to find refuge in what appeared to be a previous residence, let alone a home guarded by such a ruthless housekeeper. Hans tenderly nursed the goose egg he had received at the behest of the Scotswoman's skillet, and vowed that he would serve his retribution, not only to the woman, but also to the cat, along with anybody else that fell across his vengeful path.

As dancing animated skeletons paraded across the sepia-toned screen, the operative determined that they were going to be required to invade the house and, employing deadly measures if necessary, forcefully regain custody of the feline. An old woman and a pussycat in a dress would not be permitted to defeat him. Hans and GT Ninety-Nine would obtain firearms that were far more effective in function than the starter pistol they currently possessed, then return to the residence later that evening to recover their target.

Absolutely no human or feline could deter them from their task.

GT Ninety-Nine was thoroughly obsessed with recapturing the tabby; he had been made a mockery of far too many times to allow his endeavour to remain unfinished. The cartoon came to a close, and the pair departed with their assignments to prepare for their next decisive undertaking.

Fatticus still sported his bell, tied around his neck with a piece of red string. The yarn appeared to have been recently replaced, but the instrument of warning was still the same one that Missus Glenferrie had placed above the naughty kitten's shoulders several years before.

Its presence prompted a return to the old woman of many fond memories, the episodes of mischief the brazen little fellow had created and the great amount of hilarity to her household that he had brought. Her smile beamed radiantly as she removed the clothing from the frock-wearing cat and examined the fabric; it had been soiled and torn, and his bonnet was stained, evidently as a consequence of some time spent in the woods.

She would launder and repair the outfit for him; he looked quite charming in it.

While the Scotswoman tended to his garments, Fatticus moved to reacquaint himself with his former home. The cat sat beneath the kitchen table, where he had previously whiled away many hours awaiting Missus Glenferrie to make an inadvertent offering of morsels to the floor. He visited his old haunt, the pantry of which he had both been trapped within, and found sanctuary inside, during the misadventures of his youth.

The tabby stood in the dining room, and recalled his theft of the goose's leg; he poked his head inside the closet where he and his fellow kittens had slept for many happy hours in the soothing company of his mother, Ginger.

He was quite ecstatic to be provided the opportunity to visit his past; however, the tabby had a considerable amount of curiosity regarding how precisely the insubstantial cat in his dreams had been capable of directing him there so accurately, since she was of course merely a figment of his imagination.

After some contemplation, Fatticus supposed it really did not matter; he was safe, dry and fed once again, and in the renewed presence of someone for whom he had a great affinity.

Despite those feelings, the ginger-tabby still found himself missing his Lady Caroline very much. He hoped that she would not be too long in arriving to collect him, and spirit him back to the place he knew as his home.

The constable had quickly returned to his police box and recounted his incredible instalment of 'The Caper of the Clothed Pussycat' to his fellows, in the process providing Scotland Yard with the address currently inhabited by the rediscovered feline. The Detective Inspector was pleased to forward this crucial piece of information on to the widower author, Caroline Hawthorn, and she was quite delighted to hear that her beloved companion was safe. She contacted Missus Glenferrie straight away to arrange a collection of 'the Fatty Cuss.'

When apprised of the news, Doctor Brunswick firmly insisted that he accompany her, in case the villains chose to make another attempt to capture the feline, to retrieve her pet.

Missus Glenferrie negotiated to have the writer Hawthorn come to the residence that evening, as she wished to retain custody of her former kitten for the remainder of the day. She apprised Fatticus of their arrangement, and he was happy. He would soon be back in his tower in the sky, but the cat had missed the old woman terribly, and he was content to visit with her for the interim.

Fatticus worked diligently to inform her of such with his purring and affection, and they spent the afternoon in each other's company. The Scotswoman reminisced about the cat's mother, Ginger and his siblings, but her recollections focused intently upon the fat kitten with a voracious appetite and a nose for trouble.

It would not be inappropriate to state that the housekeeper, Missus Glenferrie, spoilt the cat absolutely rotten that day, the same one on which Caroline Hawthorn waited anxiously for the evening to arrive when she would be reunited with her missing companion. Those hours of sunlight were also used by GT Ninety-Nine and his idiotic associate Hans to plot and plan for the

unannounced entrance they intended to make at the residence that night; the same solar radiance was felt by a French man and his ginger-tabby, who were engaging in espionage for a government that callously required them to do so.

Doctor Brunswick arrived in the dwindling light of dusk, present with his motorcar to collect Missus Hawthorn, and deliver her to the place from which she had adopted the cat Fatticus some five years before; it was a house in one of the more affluent outer suburbs of London. He had been quite intrigued by recent developments, of the account that the cat, having escaped from his captors, had purportedly found his way to that address; the feline had apparently recognized the sanctuary his former home would provide.

The physician found the intelligence the animal had displayed in his adventures to be quite remarkable. It was equally as extraordinary as the feline's ability to walk through obstacles as if they did not exist.

The vile ruffian who had previously abducted the cat would not have the opportunity to get the better of Doctor Brunswick again; to make certain of it he had elected to take his pistol, hidden away so as to not alarm the emotionally fragile Caroline Hawthorn, when he had departed for the evening. Should the men choose to continue to pursue their criminal activities, the physician would be prepared for them; he was most certainly capable of following through with his desire to defend from their enemies the widowed novelist, and her curious cat.

The pair of conspirators found it necessary to exchange their vehicle as their previous method of transport was then considered to be far too recognisable. They had acquired a shrunk representation of a motorcar; a cage large enough for the ginger-tabby was scarcely able to inhabit the confines of the tiny rear seat. The operative and his man Saturday sat in their pathetic conveyance, and looked on in dismay whilst both the author, and the older gentleman who had attempted to prevent GT Ninety-Nine's escape from the Hawthorn flat arrived at the house, presumably to regain possession of the ginger-tabby they so desperately wanted for themselves.

Their operation, lest their prey be given the opportunity to depart, would need to be undertaken promptly.

The Missus Hawthorn and Glenferrie were quite cordial, the latter offering a cup of tea to both the former and her companion. Her hope was to quietly encourage recollections by the author of Fatticus's adult antics. The writer, having immense gratitude for the safety and comfort in which she had found her rotund friend, cheerfully complied with the unspoken request. Both housekeeper and physician were regaled with tales of the tabby's humorous exploits.

Despite the corroborating testimony of Doctor Brunswick, the Scotswoman could not quite be convinced to believe the accounts of the ginger-tabby's more magical endeavours, but had they been true she would not have been terribly shocked; she was quite aware that Fatticus was a very special cat.

Hours passed, with the three having a wonderful time. Fatticus basked in the attention he received from the humans. The feline had been resting on his back upon the sitting room floor when two louts chose to topple his tranquillity. Rather than opting to knock, they instead forced the front door open arbitrarily, violating the security of his sanctuary with their pistols drawn, and their voices loud.

"I am afraid I do not recall sending out any further invitations to this party," Mrs. Glenferrie stated brusquely to the two men as they charged into the sitting room.

"The cat, the one you call Fatticus," GT Ninety-Nine demanded of the disturbed occupants, "Give him to us!"

The subject of their inquiry had departed. Fatticus had run through the kitchen and, his well-padded adult frame scarcely fitting between the shelves, into the pantry he had hidden within as a kitten. He cowered in the fear that his terrible nightmare would resume, that he would be taken once again by those horrible men and wrested from his guardian with whom he had only just been reunited.

"I have had quite enough of this!" the author interjected angrily.

"What, on God's green earth," Caroline demanded, flustered completely by the entirely sordid affair, "is your interest regarding my cat?" It was a reasonable question, one to which both the doctor and the housekeeper would have also enjoyed an answer.

The as-yet unspoken intruder briefly relaxed his perpetual smirk and began to respond to her query but, before he was given a chance to speak, was sharply silenced by his stern superior.

"That," GT Ninety-Nine snapped at the writer, "is none of your concern." There was an evil gleam to his eye. "All that matters to you, at this particular point in time," he said with a devilish grin, "is that we want him and, rest assured, we will have him."

"You," the kidnapper beckoned to the Scotswoman with his pistol, "go find that cat, and bring him here."

She scowled, and raised her finger to scoff before with a cruel smile he, his tone grave and sinister, interrupted her objection. "Do it now. Or, I will shoot them both."

Missus Glenferrie's blood, with the realization that the frightening miscreant would be true to his word, grew cold. The woman certainly did not wish to relinquish her beloved Fatticus to these loathsome men; however, she also preferred to not have the author and her physician friend be killed in her master's sitting room.

The old woman, regarding the current location of the ginger-tabby, was well aware; she knew his secret hiding place, but had no need to fetch him. The cat had recovered his bravery and, prepared to do battle with the vile ruffians in defence of his Lady Caroline, re-entered the sitting room.

"Ah, there he is," the interloper sang cheerily, "the guest of honour." GT Ninety-Nine was quite pleased to see Fatticus again, his game once more in his grasp. "Bring him to me," he gestured to the Scotswoman.

Missus Glenferrie had moved to hoist the weighty Fatticus when quite unexpectedly the man of the house, having been quietly secreted in his upstairs study during all of the commotion, appeared in his smoking jacket at the doorway to the sitting room. He was positioned with his own pistol drawn towards the unwary trespasser's backside, directly behind the chief brigand.

He then rather eloquently demanded to be made aware of the justification for their violent intrusion into his home.

Major General Lewis Carlton carefully examined the scene displayed before him. The potentially lethal production presently being acted out in his sitting room caused him a great deal of alarm. It had become glaringly evident that GT Ninety-Nine had disregarded his orders, apparently deciding to take matters into his own hands, and interfere with the Hawthorn woman and her cat.

To make matters worse, the cowardice of the operative, as he had seemingly involved other agency personnel in his scheme, had apparently become contagious. Further, he was threatening a civilian physician and, perhaps the most despicable deed of all, had firearms trained upon his housekeeper.

All of which were presently occurring within his house, and beneath his own roof. He would not have it.

The operative meanwhile, recovered from his initial shock at learning his superior had a muzzle pointed toward his posterior, was frantically reassessing his current situation. The revelation of the involvement of the General was, in retrospect rather predictable; it merely added to the mounting collection of evidence that suggested a widespread conspiracy within the Feline Remote

Intelligence Gathering Service. That he had failed to realize such likelihood previously was his own failing; however, it was not the time to analyze mistakes, but rather choose apt responses.

This new development could lead to a complete disaster, or it could potentially be fashioned to provide him with an advantage. The British military, were he to inform them of the plot, was unlikely to see his position; they would be given to take the word of their respected General over that of a former German spy. Therefore, it could be easily concluded that making any attempt to proceed within Army regulations would not be prudent; it appeared to be appropriate to employ this convenient opportunity in order to affect the removal of his treacherous superior using his own, much more direct methods.

“General,” GT Ninety-Nine began jovially, as he proceeded to rotate slowly towards the irate officer that currently had him at a significant disadvantage. He smiled broadly, like the Cheshire cat, while he insincerely pleaded for temperance, “Let us discuss things before making any rash decisions. There is no need for any of this to, what is the expression? Ah yes, ‘get ugly.’”

“That will be quite enough.” The General abruptly interrupted his errant operative by cocking his pistol; the subordinate then, in a moment of self-preserving compliance, opted to cease his efforts.

“There can be no excuse for any of this,” Carlton barked, his tone obviously furious. “You have completely disobeyed an explicit command, one that I furnished you with personally. As I recall, you were told quite expressly to not involve yourself, under any circumstances, with the Hawthorn woman or her cat.”

He paused then, for an instant, as if awaiting an explanation from his subordinate but with no such response forthcoming, he resumed his diatribe. “I will have you removed; you will be forcefully retired from the service. Now, drop your weapon onto the floor before I am forced to shoot you.”

The man of the house then stated calmly and evenly, “That, my dear fellow, is an order you should choose to obey.”

GT Ninety-Nine briefly considered his position and then, whilst nodding his head and laughing quietly, he released his pistol. As it fell, the operative lunged suddenly towards the General. The two men then engaged themselves in a mortal combat for control of the officer’s remaining weapon.

Whilst Hans, by the struggle in which his two superiors were currently involved, was distracted, Doctor Brunswick expertly produced his own concealed firearm, and pointed it the direction of the operative’s unwary collaborator. His eventual recognition of the physician’s threat incited the accomplice to fire wildly

towards Brunswick; his bullet narrowly missed the gentleman who then, inflicting serious injury upon the cursed feline caretaker, made a careful retort.

The altercation having grown much too loud and violent for the gentle feline, the frightened Fatticus retreated beneath the sofa while the Missus Hawthorn and Glenferrie could only stand in silent, shocked witness as Hans fell to the floor, gasping and clutching at his chest. Those present were then forced to wait in suspense whilst GT Ninety-Nine and General Carlton, the victor likely to bring their conflict to a lethal end, fought for control of the pistol.

Doctor Brunswick made his own efforts to interject upon the deadly argument, but the marksman could not obtain a clear shot at the murderous operative; he soon abandoned his efforts and, as it was his sworn duty to do, finally moved to tend to the wounded Hans.

The General eventually lost the struggle. The operative ultimately gained control of the weapon, and shot his superior, killing him in cold blood. Then, the man of the house fell to the floor, dead.

Missus Glenferrie cried softly as GT Ninety-Nine, his intention to address all who remained, turned to face her.

"It would appear," he sneered towards those still possessing their lives, "that the Major General was killed in a violent struggle with his treacherous subordinate Hans." He stated it confidently, whilst casually moving the focus of his pistol from one person to the next.

"It would also seem that Carlton had uncovered a conspiracy that involved all of you."

The operative's visible emotion turned to that of a feigned grief. "It is so sad that I only just discovered the plot, and that I arrived too late to save my poor, beloved General; it is such a tragedy."

He shook his head solemnly, and then took to an insane laughter. In a show of contempt for the despicable man, his captives averted their eyes from his loathsome display.

The operative promptly regained his typically professional composure and gestured towards the doctor with his pistol. "You, physician. Is he dead?" he asked of Brunswick, in reference to the lifeless and unmoving Hans.

The query was answered with a spiteful nod; it looked as if his accomplice would smirk no longer.

GT Ninety-Nine then motioned, since his services regarding the hapless assistant were evidently no longer required for the gentleman of medicine to take

to his feet. The operative relieved Brunswick of his pistol, and placed it beside the fallen General. He retrieved his own weapon, and then tossed Carlton's firearm into the lap of the seemingly departed Hans.

Satisfied with his fabricated explanation, GT Ninety-Nine holstered the remaining revolver.

"Splendid," he declared cordially, as he clasped his hands together. "It would appear this evening has turned out rather well." As he glanced towards each of his hostages, he nodded, repeatedly. "Now then, as you are my prisoners, you will all be coming with me."

"Especially," he smiled contentedly, "the cat."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

WHISKERS IN THE DARK

CLEOPAWTRA, LIKE ALL CATS, had dreams of her own.

The sleek black feline moved in virtual silence through the alley, remaining with the skill that comes only with great experience in the shadows. Her presence by any but the most scrutinizing observer was undetectable.

She had a mission that night; a message, written in microscopic letters upon a tiny piece of paper, was hidden inside the cat's collar. The correspondence was of great importance, perhaps of relevance even to the future of the whole world, and the courier had been trusted to deliver the communication to those who desperately needed to read its words.

Having seen hundreds of messages to dozens of locations throughout her city, she was a veteran of her service. Her metropolis, the cat was quite certain, she was acquainted with better than any other feline, human or creature of whatever description. There was no alley she did not know, no sewer that remained unfamiliar and no rooftop upon which she, by the pale light of the moon, had not cavorted.

The miniature panther moved throughout these collective backdrops with ease and confidence. Every one of her duties was performed with distinction and, for her stunning success record, the cat was highly praised by her employers.

That night she was to navigate her most complex route. It was a dangerous course that wound through all conceivable locales, an impossible journey made practical only by her expertise. The cat would be forced to stretch all of her abilities to their limits, and exercise them in scenarios that could, with their failure, lead to her premature demise.

Her destination was a human of great stature, someone who could not be seen gaining receipt of her message under any circumstances. So that the likelihood of any observation of such acceptance was entirely out of the question, the cat would be forced to go through a great deal of difficulty.

The man resided high above, in a building that, lit down below by miniature suns, reached for the sky. Entry was only available from the underground rail, far below the street. She would need to reach the tunnels by way of rat infested sewers, patrolled by rodents some of which were as large as the cat herself; those were only themselves reached through deadly, canine inhabited alleyways such as the one that she was currently attempting to traverse.

Complete obscurity would be required to prevent a potentially lethal altercation. Any conflict could lead to an inability to complete her mission, and result in absolute catastrophe.

A mackerel tabby, a male, surveyed the scene of the alley from the top of an old weather beaten fence. Her veiled presence in it, as she made her way amongst the slumbering dogs hidden in the rubbish strewn on the ground below, was presumed to be unknown to him. She eventually ascended cautiously up a fire escape, and darted over the roof of a small block of flats, then descended down into the next alleyway beyond.

The messenger methodically progressed on her carefully predetermined course. Her destination was an unguarded entrance, which marked the next stage of her journey into the sewers.

In the next alley, she sensed the unwanted presence of the same cat. He had seemingly followed her over the flats, and stood there, gazing down as the stealthy feline worked her way past the sleeping canines. She was rapidly becoming concerned. Then again, there was no conclusive evidence that he had spotted her, nor that he continued to possess the ability to track her movements.

The tabby's decision to take up his new location may have been a mere coincidence. Further, even if the tabby had been able to follow her, she had full confidence that she would evade him in the sewers.

Regardless, it was a development the courier still found to be quite unsettling.

It was hoped that if his actions were not happenstance, the tabby had merely sensed her in the fashion that some extraordinarily talented

felines were occasionally able to do, and she would simply have to work harder in her efforts to avoid detection by this overly observant cat.

However, if the male was some manner of enemy agent, it could mean that she had been compromised. There might potentially be other operatives waiting along her route. She would need to take measures to ensure that they would not capture her, and that her message would fail to be intercepted by those hostile entities.

A sleeping dog, whilst she passed its den of discarded debris, emitted a gentle growl; she then, whilst anxiously assessing the implication this incident cast upon her affairs, froze in her tracks. A tense, but uneventful few moments confirmed that the canine had not awakened and she carried forth, unable to sense the tabby any further, his gaze no longer felt by the sleek messenger.

She relaxed somewhat with the undesired complication having appeared to make a welcome exit, and wound her way through the alleyways, amongst the rubbish bins and discarded tires, until she reached her gateway into the tunnels below ground.

Alas, he was there. The troublesome tabby was intently looking down from a tin roof high above on the sewer grate. He watched and waited, as if he knew that this was where she would eventually arrive. While silently jumping over the final row of fencing that separated her from her target, she took immediate notice of him and, the renewed presence of the evening's nemesis scuttling any hope she had of an easy outing, had quickly hidden herself away behind some rubbish bins.

It was quite obvious that there was no coincidence. This was not merely an inquisitive cat satisfying a curiosity driven by her fleeting detection.

This cat had known her destination and, with his presence there, was taunting her, challenging the messenger to show herself, as she must in order to progress upon her way. Entry through the grate into the underground would require only the briefest of exposure on her part, but it would be a moment in which, should his gazing continue uninterrupted, she would certainly be observed by the tabby.

The courier could not have that; however, there was no alternative route. Through the currently monitored opening she must promptly proceed.

A distraction would be manufactured. A silent leap was made back over the fence, and the effortless antagonism of a sleeping dog roused the

attention of her rival. The messenger then made a harried dash for the entrance, and slipped into the tunnels below unseen.

She waited just within, in the shadow beneath the grate for any sign that he would follow, or an indication that he was aware of her deception. None soon made apparent, she elected toward the damp and the wet to continue. The cat forged ahead, into the domain of gigantic rats and foul odours that her poor delicate feline nose was barely able to tolerate.

The feline courier, her memory ingrained with numerous hours of schooled familiarity that had been spent in its putrid dankness, deftly navigated the fetid maze. A brief, but hazardous encounter with an unfortunate rodent, who had made the mistake of crossing her path, was the only noteworthy interruption to her otherwise uneventful transit.

An exit from the sewer, through another grated gateway, into the rail tunnel was nearly made, but not for he was present once again. Standing watch on the opposite side, from a perch atop an abandoned train platform, the mackerel tabby apparently awaited her impending emergence from the malodorous opening.

It was impossible. She found it completely and utterly incomprehensible that he should be loitering there. No alternate route existed to the one she had followed, and she was convinced that she had not sensed him pass her on any earlier occasion.

This adversary must be far more talented than she had anticipated. That was a complication of which she was completely unprepared. Her message was in grave peril of remaining undelivered.

Another distraction would be constructed. Retreating back within the sewers, she would loudly simulate, with the horrid rats, a fictional altercation. A complex, almost impassable alternate route was to then be traversed, with the courier confidently revisiting the hopefully unobserved exit. Upon her return, she contentedly discovered that the tabby had indeed ventured into the pipes to investigate her ruse, and she was alone.

The sleek messenger pondered heavily upon her current situation. Her mission was obviously compromised; the details of her itinerary, to this enemy feline were apparently well known. The wisdom of completing her task had then come into question. It was quite possible that, should she continue with her efforts, she could expose her contact.

Nonetheless, the communication was of the utmost importance and urgency; she had been explicitly told that at all costs it must be delivered. This was the basis upon which the courier made her decision, for the sake

and the good of the world at large, to risk compromising the addressee of her precious cargo.

The sly feline, as she warily made her way through the abandoned railway tunnels found no additional indication of her unwanted 'second banana,' and only an eerie silence punctuated by the rumbling of trains in adjacent, still utilized passages. The vibrations thankfully kept the rats away; she was able to relax and, for the next leg of her trek, prepare herself.

Into the third sub-basement of the towering structure that housed the human that served as her destination, she would emerge through a small gap that existed in its foundation where it doubled as one wall of an underground subway tunnel. An active rail line, she would be required to travel a short distance with a small chance of encountering a train. However, should she choose to wait for a locomotive to pass before attempting to traverse the stretch, it was considered an unlikely possibility.

The derelict subterranean tunnel, the passageway that she currently inhabited, met at a junction with the functioning one. Two hundred feet away from there stood a tiny hatch. Its dimensions, through which to force her lean, diminutive body were barely sufficient.

Although it was quite late, trains still ran intermittently; it would be unwise to hazard meeting one in such a narrow corridor. In spite of this, the cat grew impatient and, the disturbing thoughts of the tabby long behind her, she boldly struck out for the hatch.

Her rediscovered confidence lasted, of course, only until she rounded the curve and observed that her foe stood watch beside her waypoint once more.

To make matters even worse, a train was quickly approaching from her rear.

She had no chance of retreat, so she steeled her resolve and strongly considered turning this situation to her advantage. The tabby, to avoid the locomotive would be forced to leave his post, driven to an alcove farther down the tunnel. She would run meanwhile, underneath the carriages and dive, as the train's tail passed over her, into the hatch.

The enemy feline ought to have no notion that she had done so and, or as so the courier had previously thought, she would have finally eluded him.

The littlest messenger, in order to keep her tremendous sense of terror at bay whilst the train approached and then overtook her, utilized the sum of her emotional strength. With all the speed that she could summon, she ran then, underneath the massive mechanical serpent. The roar of its engine drowned out even her sharpest thoughts.

She approached the hatch, and waited for the last carriage wheels to pass her. Not but one second afterward, the cunning feline made a lunge for her target, which she neatly slid through into the sub-basement beneath.

She paused once more with baited breath, to see if she would be followed, and that the tabby was aware of her transition the courier was yet again given no sign. Perhaps she had at last escaped him, and her exasperating adversary would be trouble no longer.

It was an entertaining hope. She savoured it, whilst progressing towards what appeared to merely be a shabby stack of crates. The carefully placed boxes provided a path into the ventilation system above.

Despite her best efforts at rummaging through her memory, she still had not successfully placed the tabby. He did not match any of the descriptions she had of known enemy operatives. The cat was an unknown quantity, a 'wild card'; this did not sit with the inky messenger at all well.

It is certainly much preferred to face an old enemy that you know, rather than encounter a new foe that you do not. Happily, it appeared to matter no longer for, if she had not already driven him off her scent, the labyrinth of air ducting within the building would certainly confound his efforts.

The ventilation system meandered its way up the vast structure, advancing one harrowing level at a time. The poor little cat would be forced to struggle up ladders that were designed for humans, not felines and, in order to secure each precious rise in elevation, make unbelievable leaps.

She had thirty of these hurdles to surmount; unfortunately, it was the only feasible way. Each one of those ascents would carry the risk of serious injury or, should she miss a jump or lose her footing, even worse.

Here, she was unquestionably the expert; having made this climb so many times before, she was decidedly the one in control. There was absolutely no chance that the tabby would be capable of besting her here; this was irrefutably her arena.

Nevertheless, she felt that it might be a productive activity to set a trap and, not that there was even the slightest chance the clever feline courier could be, ensure that she was not presently being shadowed, just to be safe. Were the tabby actually still pursuing her, he would be most vulnerable when he was required to scramble up the slippery ducting from the ladder to the landing above. She would then be in a position to knock him down to the intersection beneath, injuring him, and halting his unwanted advances.

The messenger proceeded, with her usual careful stride, to make her way down the length of the shaft. Then, her covert talents tested to their utmost she, and with as little sound as one could possibly permit, returned back along it. Slowly and quietly, the landing that she had been at minutes earlier was stalked.

Abruptly, the courier sprang into action, charging at the disadvantaged tabby when his head and forepaws appeared over the edge of the ducting, the creature desperately struggling to pull himself up on to the next level.

As he was struck loose of his tenuous grip by the blow that his apparent adversary expertly delivered, the tabby emitted a sharp cry of surprise. In silence, he fell; his eyes, while he plummeted to the ducting below stared up, fixed upon his dark quarry.

There was neither fear nor shock in his gaze, but rather something that the celebrating messenger did not immediately comprehend, an emotion that she had never before encountered. Yet, the expression that she saw displayed in the mackerel tabby's eyes was clear to her in a mere instant. It was an exhibit of his irrefutable affection for her, the sentiment of his love.

Her mood no longer jovial, she gasped when, in a completely uncontrolled fashion, he struck the base of the ducting and then, with no further movement observed, lay lifeless.

The dark feline was compelled by her own emotion to abandon her mission, and run to his aid. However, to such a relatively trivial desire she could not surrender. Despite his injuries, of his feelings for her, or of her emotions for him she must continue; she must deliver her message. The world could be in grave danger if she did not.

A brief prayer, by a petite black cat was made for an injured, love-sickened tabby, the same one that as a result of her actions lay unconscious beneath her, in the ventilation shaft below. She then turned

and, hoping that she might finish her task quickly and return to comfort her hurt admirer, ran.

There were, for the sheer eruption of love that she had observed in his eyes, few explanations. It was a devotion of such magnitude that she had never previously observed directed towards any feline, least of all her. Despite that, the concept that to pursue her he might go to such lengths still seemed rather absurd. Perhaps it had been an effort to protect her, and ensure that she was safe from some unknown jeopardy.

Regardless, she scampered and climbed until exhausted but, on the rising passion that she felt for the tabby, managing to subsist. Promptly, the little black messenger had only one remaining trial to pass. A final harrowing foray would need to be made along a narrow ledge, affixed to the exterior of the building some thirty stories above the street. The distance required was merely a few yards, but any misstep would most certainly prove to be fatal as the feline would plummet to her doom.

She emerged on to the ledge from the ventilation shaft. Only one direction remained available as the hatch, rigged for her later return, then swung shut behind her. Frighteningly, the courier immediately realized that she was not alone. A Siamese, a known enemy agent, was waiting for her there.

There was no option available other than to confront him on the precipice. Time with which to reopen the tampered flap and make her escape was not afforded to her. The messenger moved with as much menace as she could muster towards her competitor and, in preparation to engage his rival, the Siamese arched his back. The one soon vanquished was assured to pay the ultimate price for their defeat.

However, she must deliver the message, no matter what the circumstances and despite any consequence, for this was her task; to complete his mission, her opponent must stop her all the same.

The wind, shrieking about them, served as a harbinger of destruction whilst the combatants, waiting for the precise moment when one of them would deem it appropriate to strike, slowly inched closer. Their altercation would then commence, and bring about whatever horrific result with which that confrontation consequently concluded.

Quite unexpectedly, a creature composed ostensibly only of a single howl sprang forth from the hatch and, smashing into the unwary Siamese, leapt over the little black cat. They were both cast over the ledge to their fate upon the pavement.

It was her tabby.

How he had initially discovered her, the tabby was never quite aware, nor of what force had guided him in his further efforts to find her that night. A part of his soul had distinguished she would be in danger, and that unless he undertook the means necessary to save her, she would be in mortal peril.

The mackerel had then made, for the one that he loved so much, a brave stand and, driven to follow her not by any ability of sense, but by the power of his feelings alone, he fought for the one that he had observed and admired for such a long time.

The conflict had been finished in but a single shocking moment. Morosely, the stunned survivor, her path cleared by the suicidal charge of her forever-nameless suitor advanced towards the window where she would be swiftly spirited through it, and into the office within. Her vital message was then delivered, her mission complete and, despite her personal loss, hailed as a great success by those unaware of her sacrifice.

The world was safe once more. By a well-meant tabby cat, in love with another that had never known he was waiting to be with her, the forces of evil had been averted from their wicked determination. She was soon returned to the ledge and, struck with overwhelming grief, the tiny cat cried.

Joining with the wind, she howled; another forlorn wail, as if from a sympathetic angel was carried upon it, sharing in her song of sorrow.

She rapidly realized that it was no heavenly voice. Rather, it was the tabby. The courier looked over the edge and, perched on the outcropping exterior to the story below, he was trapped; his ventilation hatch was unable to be opened from the outside.

The ecstatic little black cat mewed to tell him that she was present and aware of him. A fire, by the happiness shown in his eyes was subsequently lit in her heart. She frantically made her way through the rigged hatch, along the shaft and down to the floor below, and the flap that prevented his return inside was quickly forced ajar.

Sparks of electricity, whilst the two joyfully touched their noses together for the first time, flowed between them, and each then knew the true meaning of love.

As he greatly longed for his own true love Caroline, these sorts of stories made Francis rather despondent. However, that he would someday be with her again he held, within his heart, a vast hope.

In point of fact, of that eventuality he was resoundingly certain.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

WHILE THE CAT IS AWAY

MUCH TO THE DISMAY OF ONE BRITISH INTELLIGENCE OPERATIVE designated GT Ninety-Nine, the constable on the beat had informed his colleagues of the gunfire that he had observed exchanged within the Carlton residence and, perhaps only seconds after the agent's declaration that all present were in his custody, they had inconveniently arrived.

His earlier concluding statement then ended as a half-truth. The Detective Inspector would simply refuse to permit the military to arbitrarily take possession of all of the witnesses, as the crime had occurred on civilian property, and as such was the domain of Scotland Yard.

Telephone calls were placed, and the operative's credentials were verified. The Army soon arrived, carrying an order from the Minister of Defence stating that both Caroline Hawthorn and her cat were to be placed under the auspices of the Secrets Act, and taken away by GT Ninety-Nine; this directive infuriated the Detective Inspector to no end.

Missus Glenferrie and Doctor Brunswick were removed to the Yard, amidst great protest on both of their parts, to assist the police in their enquiries. Author and tabby were swiftly escorted by the military, under armed guard, to the underground Feline Remote Intelligence Gathering Service facilities some distance to the north of London.

Caroline, by the lot of it, was thoroughly overwhelmed. As to exactly what had just occurred, she had no notion; more disturbingly, she knew none of these people who were evidently rather aware of her. Secret military organizations, murders and cover-ups, they were all just a tad too much for the reclusive author. She could not have made up such fiction herself, no matter how vivid her imagination.

Ludicrously, not only she, but also her cat was apparently under arrest, for unspoken crimes and with no opportunity for a defence. It was preposterous

to detain the feline. She wondered what the Army could possibly want with him or, for that matter, what they required from either of them; their motives were quite unfathomable.

Despite the accounts from his witnesses regarding the actualities of the events that had taken place inside the Carlton residence, the Detective Inspector did not have the standing to accuse the homicidal agent of any crime. The legally invisible military operative, the policeman was told, had been granted immunity from prosecution. The man apparently served as a 'vital part' of British defence.

Brunswick was absolutely livid, doggedly insisting to the Inspector that this situation could not possibly stand and, to liberate both the innocent woman and her cat from the madmen that had absconded with them, the police should proceed to the unspecified secret location of the covert facility straight away. Sadly, the Detective Inspector was only capable of reiterating the Army's precedence in the matter and that as a result, the case was officially closed.

Scotland Yard shortly released the housekeeper and the physician, with the latter requiring threats of force and imprisonment to convince him to depart; then, the Inspector wrote his remarkable report. He recounted the tale of an obese ginger-tabby, stolen by a highly trained government operative for the feline's purportedly strange abilities. He detailed the escape of said cat from his captors, its cross-country trip, in a frock and a bonnet to the home it had left as a kitten and the gunfight that, during a second attempt to kidnap said animal by members of the sane rational military that defended British shores, had subsequently ensued.

In short, the account was a complete and total farce. However, the Inspector was certain that it would promptly and quietly vanish from the archive, never to be read by anyone.

Meanwhile, Doctor Brunswick, making a return to the Carlton residence where he would collect his motorcar, ranted and raved like a lunatic whilst sharing a cab with Missus Glenferrie. They made not the slightest sense to the housekeeper, those fantastic notions that Fatticus could place thoughts into a person's mind; neither did the idea that he could walk through doors. He was just a cat, after all.

Regardless, these absurdities did seem to be fairly convincing to the soldiers who had arrived to take her poor kitten away, he and his writer-guardian Caroline Hawthorn, for undisclosed reasons. The whole affair had been serious enough, in fact to warrant the death of the man that she had tended to, and loved for many years.

There was little for an old Scotswoman to do. If it was given to her to decide, she would see the evil man that had slain her employer burnt at the stake,

the same ruffian who had incarcerated her Fatticus, and planned untold heinous acts against her poor plump kitten. The physician could go on all he liked regarding the finer points of the situation, but she truly did not care. She only desired simple revenge, and Missus Glenferrie would do her utmost to find a way to deliver her wrath to those who were quite deserving of it.

That she would be granted the divine opportunity to carry out her vengeance, she prayed to God.

There were so many cats. Caroline could not even hope to tally the number of mews and howls that she heard whilst she was escorted, with Fatticus firmly cradled in her arms, to her cell. The apprehensive feline twitched his head about vigorously, the animal unable to determine the numerous locations of his countless prospective adversaries, and then eventually chose to bury his head into Caroline's armpit in defeat, as if an ostrich taking to the sand.

The simple-minded cat, his intellect burdened with the heavy weight of recent events, had completely surrendered. He desperately needed respite, an opportunity with which to collect his thoughts, and reconcile himself with all that had lately come to pass.

The 'Australopithecine Neanderthal', as the novelist had chosen to refer to the simian GT Ninety-Nine had, in the back of the army lorry, interrogated her quite callously while the truck carried them to their subterranean destination. Regarding the meaning of the phrases, the nonsensical sentences at the end of her stories, he had quite fervently questioned her. It appeared he was convinced that they held a deeper meaning, and contained some sort of concealed message.

Of that, she had no absolutely no idea, Caroline told him. As far as she knew, the lines were the product of mere inspiration; the narratives were similarly borne by some previously unfamiliar inner visionary. Failing to mention Fatticus, she alleged that, as if by someone far removed, the tales had been magically typed with no thought given to them on her part.

The operative did not believe her. Menacing Fatticus with vile notions, the villain intimidated her with implications of violence. There was nothing that the author could say to assuage the heartless thug. Only once they had arrived at the facility did he mercifully cease his verbal assaults.

Caroline attempted to obtain some explanation for the presence of such great numbers of cats, but the operative was not willing to reveal any information of his own. He merely smiled disingenuously as the soldiers pushed the woman, holding her woe-begotten feline, into a desolate cell, closed and then locked the door.

The following morning was certain to hold many answers for GT Ninety-Nine. The scientists would commence their testing of the aberrant animal, and he would continue his investigation into the authors part in the plot that he was utterly convinced existed, the conspiracy between the woman and her husband, and their plan for escape.

The cell was sparse, consisting of a single cot, a rustic toilet, a crude basin and a cold concrete floor. Fatticus settled himself as best he could upon the tiny bed, and prepared to engage the emergency protocol for when his delicate sensibilities were faced with such an assault. He would sleep while Caroline, her mind awash with so many questions and so few answers, could only sit on the edge of the mattress and stare blankly off into space.

The endless mewing of countless hordes of felines threatened to toss her fragile mind over the edge of a looming psychiatric cliff, and down into the deep abyss of insanity. All the woman knew for certain was that there was some scenario involving both the British Army and pussycats. What this meant, in relation to the author and her particular feline, was still the subject of a vast internal inquiry.

Fatticus soon successfully fell off to sleep; he then began to twitch, and dream. Caroline once again felt the overwhelming urge to record his slumbering, but had no typewriter with which to do so.

Promptly, the compulsion turned into an agony. She chose to manipulate an imaginary machine, one that she envisioned to be in front of her. Upon such, she related another tale involving a cat aboard an ill-fated fishing vessel.

However, at its conclusion was not merely one bizarre, meaningless line, but four of them.

Furry rhinoceros ate nectarines carelessly.

Iguanas swing lazily over volcanoes.

Every snake yawns opening up clams.

Albino rats organize labels in nice envelopes.

She began to consider that perhaps the operative had been right. It may be that, hidden within these rubbish sentences, there truly was some sort of message. Her literary-oriented mind, exploring even the most complex of associations struggled to find meaning in the lines, but the woman discovered no coherent communication.

It was certainly possible that the solution was far less complicated. Caroline moved to try plainer methods of decryption, and quickly revealed the obvious phrase constructed when she simply took the first letter of every word.

FRANCIS LOVES YOU, CAROLINE

It read, "Francis loves you, Caroline."

The author, her sanity having nearly degraded to the point where she would no longer be able to sustain her vague grasp upon reality, began to laugh uncontrollably. Her greatest hope was that the cryptogram truly meant that somewhere, somehow Francis was both alive and attempting to contact her, but her common sense contended that the primitive cipher was, as Doctor Brunswick had suggested, merely an assertion made from deep within herself, a self-initiated attempt to console the widow, and assist her in finding acceptance of her loss.

Were it to stand alone, she would have been given to agree with the physician. Yet, recent events taken into consideration, there was simply far too great an assortment of circumstantial evidence not to suggest the fantastic, and arguably more palatable notion.

She conceded to it, embracing the questionable belief that her still-living husband had authored the declaration of his love as if it were not conjecture, but gospel truth.

After his fish-related dream had finished, Fatticus had found himself in the lonely place once again, where the shadowy cat, Cleopawtra had come to visit him in possession of a message she told him was intended for his Lady Caroline. She proceeded to then display a series of images for him; as best as he could comprehend, the communication was something about fruit, lizards and white rodents with little bits of paper.

As he had failed to do so upon the previous several occasions she had shown these things to him, he did not understand any part of it. Despite that, he was happy to see his slumber-time companion and, to her efforts, made no objections. He rubbed himself up against her, and she sternly chastised him for his advances; Fatticus was more than willing to pay the price of her rebuke for a spot of well-needed affection.

Cleopawtra sincerely hoped that Fatticus's guardian, his Lady Caroline had not only received the message as she had the ones earlier, but that she would also be able to see the obvious statement that had been encoded within them. They had desired more time to make Caroline thoroughly aware of her ginger-tabby's abilities, and give her the opportunity to firmly accept the authenticity of the link, but contemporary events had forced them to act prematurely.

Her companion Francis had been ecstatic when, at the end of his wife's contributions to the children's magazine, the messages had appeared. They served as conclusive evidence that one-way communication, from person to feline, to tabby to human, was established. After all, it had been no accident that a leaflet from the residence of Lewis Carlton advertising the adoption of ginger-tabbies had long since found itself in Caroline Hawthorn's letterbox.

The General had been poignantly aware of his new houseguest's origins, and had seen her unforeseen appearance as an opportunity to set in motion a plan that could potentially free his indentured former pupil from the regrettable fate that had befallen him. That his adored Missus Glenferrie however had opted to become attached to the most gifted of the kittens, and that her attempts to dissuade people from his adoption led to his pairing with Colonel Hawthorn's wife Caroline, were eventualities that had been quite unscripted, but welcome.

Carlton had taken a photograph of both the novelist and her new blue-eyed friend from the upstairs window when they departed from his home that night. Clandestine arrangements were then made for Francis to glimpse the remarkable picture. The colour of the kitten in the monochrome image was unspecified, but the markings were unmistakable; the feline Cleopawtra was taught to recognize the woman, and her cherubic companion.

Locating the pair was a process that took several years, but one night she would finally find him in his empty place. He was so delighted to have her presence dispel his overwhelming loneliness. This obese ginger-tabby, by the name of Fatticus would show to her the appearance of his human guardian, and she would remember it to be Caroline, the wife of her own companion.

Francis was so very overjoyed to observe what Cleopawtra had seen, but his enthusiasm had been tempered with the knowledge that a long road still laid ahead of them. It would take some time for the telepathic feline to teach Fatticus how to employ his own abilities, and communicate with his human counterpart. In addition, it appeared that his talents only functioned while he was asleep, or distracted; this complication hindered any efforts at two-way communication.

It had been quite the stroke of luck when, by pure chance Francis had come across the remarkable children's periodical in a local newsagent. His wife's name was proudly proclaimed upon the front of it, and their experimental communiqué's were austere printed at the conclusions of her anthropomorphic narratives.

However, the only way Francis had of knowing that this latest telepathic telegram had been received and understood was through Fatticus. The following events that the cat described to Cleopawtra would indicate either Caroline's recognition, or her continued ignorance of his attempts to make contact. It was vital that she understand the message; judging from what her companion had

told his, the woman and her tabby were both in imminent and grave danger from the malicious GT Ninety-Nine.

The pair, lest the agent choose to take it upon himself to carry out his threats made so long ago, would need to take measures to escape him at once.

Fatticus had since awoken; his connection to Cleopawtra was broken, and he soon set himself upon an errant fly, which tempted the hungry feline with its proximity to his teeth and claws. The cat began to chase it, while Caroline strove to digest the profound revelation that she had just experienced; she attempted a preliminary rationalization of all that she had observed, the events of earlier in the evening, the military program involving an army of cats and, most of all, the heartening message purportedly from her one true love.

The author became promptly aware of the connection. Carlton, the man who had apparently been in command before the vile operative had killed him, was the man from whom Caroline had adopted Fatticus. It was likely that he had known of her due to his own association with Francis, her husband having himself been a soldier. The specifics of their interrelationship were still unclear, however it was obvious that there was a distinct correlation between all of the factors involved in her mystery. She continued her contemplation.

Meanwhile, the cat blindly blundered through the cell door. As his focus on the fly became absolute, and his awareness of the world around him fell to nothingness, the tabby was unable to keep himself from doing so. Caroline only realized that he had proceeded to accomplish such when, frightened and lonely, Fatticus began to mew and cry; his scratches sharply signalled the feline's desire to return inside with his human companion.

She whispered at the ginger-tabby through the narrow slit that the guards used to observe their prisoners, and urged him to run away, to scamper off and hide from the soldiers, but he flatly refused. He would not be separated from his guardian if he could do anything to prevent it; Fatticus wandered off to search for the loathsome man who had brought them there, and demand that he be readmitted into his shameful accommodation.

The cat found him easily, residing a dozen or so yards further down the bleak corridor. The operative sat at a guard station, reading a newspaper and drinking his tea. GT Ninety-Nine seemed rather engrossed in his entertainment, and was blissfully unaware of the animal's presence until Fatticus announced himself with a 'snough', his curious combination of a sneeze and a cough.

The man finally noticed that the feline was there. The gelatinous creature then stared at him, briefly but relentlessly, in an attempt to psychically convey to the unsophisticated human that he wished to be returned to his Lady Caroline, post haste.

His efforts did not quite achieve the effect that Fatticus had intended. Momentarily, the man howled like an angered wolf, rising abruptly to his feet and knocking his tea to the ground. Inexplicably, the human was seemingly angered by the feline's minimal request.

Subsequently, and just as suddenly, two soldiers emerged into the scene and, leaving the unfortunate cat alone once again, forcefully escorted the furious character away from it.

Fatticus was frustrated, for there was no one available to help him gain re-entry to the cell that functioned as his new rather minimalist residence. The cat made a dismal return to the door, and patiently positioned himself in front of it. His fondest hope was that a human would soon be along to assist him with his desire to be relocated to the other side.

The badge, the one pinned to the chest of the man who sat in the chair previously occupied by Major General Lewis Carlton, read Belgrave. The once-sergeant and former drill instructor of the Collingwood military college was the new head of the Feline Remote Intelligence Gathering Service.

He stroked his chin in quiet contemplation whilst he read the contents of the distressing document quite loudly, a hand-written note that had been hastily scribbled upon ruled paper by his predecessor, a good friend and highly respected superior.

GT Ninety-Nine, the operative flanked by two soldiers assigned to restrict his movements to those few that Major General Belgrave would allow, was forced to stand and listen; the man had been apprehended not long after the discovery of the statement that was hidden away in his superior's desk by the then-departed Carlton.

It was damning testimony; the late officer alleged that his operative likely had some rather negative intentions towards him, and was potentially moving to take lethal action on his own behalf.

That prediction had proven to be regrettably accurate.

The memorandum continued by stating that, were anything to happen to the General, GT Ninety-Nine was to be considered the primary suspect. It was quite a serious indictment indeed.

Lewis Carlton had been one of Belgrave's closest acquaintances, and he was, to say the least, very dissatisfied with recent developments. The man had been previously recommended by the deceased Major General to assume command of the operation should Carlton no longer have the capacity to do so, and the Army had evidently agreed, promoting the officer to the post the moment his superior's death had been confirmed.

Belgrave arrived at the facility shortly thereafter, placed his scepticism regarding the activities of his new organization aside, and set about collecting evidence to either verify or refute GT Ninety-Nine's purported conspiracy.

It appeared that it was in truth a rather straightforward matter. The condemned operative, choosing to make no statements on his own behalf, remained silent. Then, he expertly disabled the two men alongside him, and implemented his escape.

Belgrave rose to give pursuit, but found the scoundrel had completely vanished by the time he reached his office door. In a show of concern, he shook his head slowly. The man was a lunatic, and it could prove to be a rather gloomy encounter for anyone who had the misfortune of straying across his path.

He returned to his desk. Belgrave was confident that the operative would be captured before he could leave the building.

The note had further requested that should GT Ninety-Nine attempt to detain Caroline Hawthorn and her cat, for whatever reason Belgrave was still at a complete loss to comprehend, they ought to be promptly released. He had been informed that the writer and her feline companion were indeed in custody, and Belgrave would see to their discharge in the morning. The hour was late, and the evening, with the obviously deranged operative running about, was no longer safe.

The note concluded by suggesting that should every one of its predicted events occur, the entire operation ought to be relocated, and all of the operatives reassigned, evidently in order to accommodate the peaceful retiring of one lone spy.

It was a ridiculous notion, and Major General Belgrave felt that the best interests of his country would serve to negate his dear friend's noble request. It was certainly not military policy that one would go to such drastic efforts for the sake of a single soldier. That they could never quietly leave their posts was simply their condition, and all who signed on to these sorts of services were made plainly aware of such consequences.

Besides, whatever position Belgrave may have taken on the matter, he was certain the Army would never agree to such a move; it would be impossible to convince them that GT Ninety Nine's actions had compromised the operation to such a point as to warrant that severity of a response. His superiors would simply feel that it would all be too much of an inconvenience for them to undertake.

Then, this most-recent commander of the Feline Remote Intelligence Gathering Service read the name of the operative in question.

Colonel Francis Hawthorn.

It was the same pathetic child that he had spent a great deal of his valuable time painfully working to mould into some semblance of a soldier, the young man who was given reprieve from his methods to be trained as an officer, and give service to his country in the Second Boer War. As Belgrave recalled, the fellow had retired, but was then recalled to duty for the Great War and, to his knowledge, never returned, having reportedly been tragically killed at the front mere days away from the armistice.

Belgrave knew deep in his heart that this particular soldier would have never volunteered to join an agency such as this. His love for his wife was legendary; his devotion to her was renowned throughout the entire armed forces, and his romantic notions had served as an inspiration to all the men of the Army.

The General grunted in annoyance. That such a man could have been somehow coerced to take part in these sorts of underhanded dealings whilst his wife, in the mistaken belief her beloved husband had been killed, lived out the remainder of her sad life could only be the result of a terrible injustice.

This would be an error that Belgrave would be quite pleased to correct. This operative, the one formerly known as Colonel Francis Hawthorn, would be worth all of that trouble after all.

Belgrave sighed, and began to tackle the mountain of paperwork that he would be required to submit in order to bring about Carlton's last request. For this endeavour to succeed GT Ninety-Nine would need to be permitted to escape the facility, and become a rogue threat to the operation and even then, it was still going to be an uphill battle to convince the rather conservative Ministry of Defence that it should embark upon such a radical course of action.

He unofficially suggested that his new charges stand down for the night, and take an opportunity to enjoy a little 'off time.' Events were then free to run their course and, providing the required justification for Belgrave's proposed activities, their new adversary was allowed to depart unhindered.

However, if, in the future, the former drill instructor were ever presented with the opportunity to place his well-seasoned hands upon the scoundrel he, among other things, would happily wring the villainous weasel's neck. Belgrave would do it for his friend Carlton, the Hawthorns and his own grim satisfaction.

The general would need to sharpen his pencil; it was going to be a very long and tedious night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

A CAT IN THE CRADLE

MAJOR GENERAL BELGRAVE had been unable to inform the writer Hawthorn that her husband was still alive; in fact, he stated to her exactly that, completely unprompted, when he marched up to her at the front gate of the facility where she awaited her release. He halted, made a smart right turn to face her, and spoke brusquely.

“Due to military confidentiality,” he said in his haughtiest available tone, “I am afraid I can neither confirm nor deny the continued service of your husband, nor inform you of his present location.”

She looked rather confused while he spoke, and then for a moment surprised; that was followed, as if Belgrave had told her exactly what she had always wished to hear, by an expression of great relief. It appeared to the General that, as to the state of things, the woman had already developed some notion on her own.

He continued on, more quietly and seriously. “Unfortunately, after I had him arrested, the man who previously detained you escaped. Do be careful.” He turned smartly right once again and, returning to his stacks of paperwork coupled with seemingly endless arguments with the Ministry of Defence, marched back into the facility.

Belgrave had a soldier chauffeur both the woman and her grossly obese ginger-tabby back into London, a courtesy for which the pair was quite thankful. The Major General truly hoped that it would end well for the lost lovebirds, the writer and the spy. He may not have looked it, but he really was quite the romantic. The rough-and-tumble military man had faith that the Hawthorns would find each other again; to ensure their efforts had the greatest chance of success, he would certainly do his part.

The doctor had apparently taken to standing watch over Caroline’s flat for, mere moments after author and cat returned to the relative safety of their

home, he rather promptly appeared, giving the both of them a rather unpleasant start. Brunswick, out of common consideration he had claimed, rang the Missus' Tottenham and Glenferrie as rapidly as he had entered; the housekeepers were soon present, the two fawning over the spoiled brat of a tabby whilst trading sewing tips, and exchanging humorous tales regarding, belly full to bursting of his precious kibble, their fat and furry feline friend.

The cat was quite enjoying himself. He had spent all night trapped, away from his Lady Caroline, on the other side of the cell door; abandoned, and alone in that miserable place, it was a torture that he hoped to never face again. Not until morning did the men finally come, soldiers who had released his companion, allowing her to once again hold Fatticus, then carry him away from that dismal hole in the ground filled with all manner of coarse individuals and unfamiliar felines.

The chin rubs and ear patting, however, were quickly making him forget all about it; to encourage their continuance, he purred loudly.

Brunswick listened intently while Missus Hawthorn related her experiences at the secretive government facility; unfortunately, she was unable to provide him with any particularly conclusive information. There had been a great many cats there, of that she could be certain, but the soldiers had been careful not to expose her to anything that would permit her to draw any firm deductions as to their purpose. The news that the fiend who had shot the man Carlton had escaped custody and was presently on the run worried the physician greatly; the consequently rogue operative would be a very dangerous man indeed.

The doctor was straight on the telephone to the Yard, demanding that a police officer be immediately stationed outside the flat. He argued that the writer needed urgent protection from a man who was, in his professional opinion, quite evidently criminally insane.

The policemen Brunswick initially spoke with were not terribly cooperative, but he persisted. Eventually, he reached the Detective Inspector who, after being brought up to date on the current state of affairs also felt that, in the event the fugitive chose to carry his schemes any further, it would be prudent to place a man there, at least for the near future.

Caroline went silent while the physician talked to Scotland Yard and, as to how best to tell the doctor that she felt her husband was actually still alive, squabbled with herself. The truth, that she had mimed out nonsense on an imaginary typewriter, the first letters of which created a rather basic statement of love would by the scientifically-minded gentleman be scrutinized and criticized for the remainder of the day; she was not particularly up to the task of listening to him carry on for such a great length of time.

It would be far simpler to inform Brunswick that she had discovered the information through a more believable mechanism. Therefore, she crafted a minor fib, a fictitious claim in which the incarcerated woman had purportedly overheard one guard say to another that, because she failed to be aware that Francis was not truly dead, he had felt sorry for her.

The substituted story was of pretty shoddy manufacture, but to her great relief the doctor readily bought the lie lock, stock and barrel since his great conspiracy, with her stunning admission, was restored back to life. It also provided more than sufficient interest to derail the ladies discussion involving the future of Fatticus's fashions, and spawned quite the angry outburst from Missus Glenferrie, who had a great deal to say with regards to the government, none of which would be repeatable in polite company.

There was, however, no additional knowledge as to the whereabouts of the long-absent Francis Hawthorn, and all that came of the conversations of the day was a large amount of speculation relating to the potentially dire situations the man could currently be facing. The afternoon wore on, with the housekeepers magically producing a number of baked goods from the meagre contents of Caroline's kitchen, and endeavouring to drown everyone in numerous cups of tea.

The concerned Mister Kao stopped in to pay his respects to the author and her feline; Victoria Melbourne also made a brief visit with what was, apparently, the world's favourite blue-eyed ginger-tabby. Her guests then shortly departed. Doctor Brunswick was quite adamant in his proclamation that, the moment she possessed any further information, Caroline would contact him. The ladies provided Fatticus with a suitably affectionate farewell.

Caroline then took a nice long hot bath, drank some much-needed merlot and, to observe the policeman standing watch, occasionally glanced out from the window; it was a rather comforting sight. She placed a candle on the sill, in front of the glass, calling for her true love's return, and neatly inserted a blank piece of paper into her typewriter, the one he had bought for her so long ago to, should Fatticus finally fall off to sleep, await any further communication that might occur.

Much to her great chagrin, the cat appeared to be afflicted with insomnia.

Fatticus refused to cease his endless rounds of patrolling and inspecting; he wanted to make absolutely certain that everything was exactly as he had left it, that nothing had been taken and that his precious castle in the sky was safe and secure once more. Until he was completely convinced of this, he would not sleep; not even the warm milk Caroline had thoughtfully offered to the feline was enough to bring him to slumber.

The human then played with Fatticus. She dangled a patch of fur on the end of a string in his favourite game for what seemed like hours, and he savoured every precious moment of it. He never wanted it to end, for the cat was worried that perhaps he would be taken away once more, and this respite was only temporary as, intending to again steal off with the tabby and his guardian to yet another horrible place, the nasty scoundrel would return.

Nevertheless, it was inevitable that his steam would finally deplete, and Fatticus ultimately curled up on the red Chinese carpet in the centre of the study, nodding off to his land of dreams for more feline adventures.

Now, all Caroline need do was wait, while elsewhere, a desperate man was plotting his revenge.

GT Ninety-Nine, betrayed by the smug Carlton even after his death, was a British operative no longer. The spy's loyalty to his new country had been rewarded with complete dishonour, and disgrace. He was a fugitive, the individual known once again as Fritz, a rogue who, incapable of finding peace or sanctuary anywhere, would be forced to hide in the shadows for the remainder of his days. Neither, and Fritz would make quite certain of this would the Hawthorns, nor the flabby demonic cat that they called Fatticus, find any solace.

He had watched in total dismay whilst his new commander, the man named Belgrave, had released the treacherous woman and her foul feline. Fritz hid amongst the trees, using his well-honed skills to survey the facility, and monitor the movements of the beast that had spawned his downfall. Surprised also by the seeming lack of a search effort, the spy had later made his way through the forest, much as Fatticus and his mother before him, to the neighbourhood in which the presently deceased Carlton formerly resided.

Fritz had patiently and expertly gained illicit entry into several local houses in order to acquire what he would need to fashion a disguise, a new persona with which, upon the human and the grotesque animal who had chosen to ruin his life, he could wreak his vengeance. Perhaps Belgrave secretly wished for his runaway operative to dispose of the troublemakers; for the commander's failure to engage in a widespread hunt for the escaped former agent, he could see no other explanation.

After all, it really was the fault of the Hawthorns that his precious Carlton had died. Fritz had merely been a single gear in a complex apparatus of events that, with her cryptic writing, the author had set in motion. In fact, he could not be held morally responsible for Carlton's death altogether; the Hawthorns were undeniably the true culprits, the pair that had refused to yield to the might that strove to hold them apart, and who would not remain subservient to the superior powers that compelled all of them to serve their designated purposes.

He would see to it that, for their impudence, they would be punished; Fritz would be the instrument of their justice, for Carlton, the Army, the Crown and the whole of the British Empire.

It soon was the early dawn, and dew rested upon the grass and flowers about Caroline Hawthorn's flat as a fresher policeman replaced the weary comrade that had been keeping watch throughout the night. Birds sang their morning song, while a kindly older gentleman, out on a breakfast stroll, strode past the constable, who tipped his hat to the senior citizen and bid him good day. The elderly man stopped for a moment, apparently choosing to embark upon a mission of chivalry and assist a young lady who was having difficulty negotiating a pram from the entrance to her block.

They had a cordial discussion, the younger woman and the older man and, as he snuck a peek at the infant inside the carriage, he smiled; the child's gloved hands and booted feet stretched towards a toy dangling high above, his face was obscured by a bonnet. The baby appeared to be rather adorable, but was quite heavy; the man decided that the mother must have fed her child a tad too generously. The seemingly well-meaning fellow then escorted her out onto the street, where she carried on to her nameless destination.

As she rolled her pram off into the distance, the gentleman and the constable engaged in some light banter; the chat culminated in the elder citizen making several blows to the policeman's face, and promoting his eventual unconsciousness. The man, remarkably spry for his age effortlessly dragged the fallen officer behind the bushes that lined the fencing. He then straightened his appearance somewhat, and made his way inside the block of flats; his objective was one particular residence situated on the top floor.

He planned to quietly pick the lock on the Hawthorn flat, and surprise the pair while they were sleeping. The man would then deliver a swift blow to both the woman and her wretched cat that would serve to punctuate the end of their saga, and bring a desperately desired conclusion to his own personal catastrophe.

What Fritz was not aware of was the sad truth that the two were no longer present, having been expertly disguised by the team of Doctor Brunswick, Missus Glenferrie and Missus Tottenham, who had together created the facade of a young woman with a baby in a pram. It was the same that Fritz would be quite humiliated to learn had effectively deceived him. He was a professional in the field, a man that held his abilities at both deception and the detection of same in his own high regard.

During the preceding darkness, Fatticus had dreamt, but not of alley cats or fishing boats; he had visions only of the shadow cat Cleopawtra, who delivered yet another strange message, showing pictures to the distracted younger male

whose only real interest was in obtaining from the older woman for whom he had grown quite a fondness some slumber-time affections. She urged him with gentle nips of persuasion to focus, and Caroline had recorded the lines on her typewriter. Then, for their crucial content, she eagerly decrypted them.

They were,

Elephants love breaking eggs.

Under ferns foxes run away.

Newts conduct electricity.

The first letters of each spelt,

ELBE UFFRA NCE

It took several agonizing moments before the author recognized that the message was the name of a place. The communication indicated Elbeuf, France, a small town on the river Seine, which must have been the present location of Francis. Indeed, Caroline was quite certain of it.

That she go there in an attempt to find her husband, the man she had longed to rejoin for so many years, the one for whom she existed and without which her life proved meaningless, was essential.

She had roused the others in the middle of the night, with profuse apology but an immense sense of urgency; Caroline had a poor feeling in her stomach that, in an effort to prevent her from reuniting with her one true love, the evil operative would soon resume his exploits. The housekeepers and the physician all welcomed the news that she had been blessed with the location of her mate. The author kept the details of said revelation deliberately vague, but even the inquisitive Brunswick, the doctor having long since learned to simply accept that things were how Caroline Hawthorn stated them to be, made no further enquiry.

They had all agreed that, the brigand using the opportunity of the early light to carry out his despicable deeds, Fritz would likely choose the dawn to strike. In anticipation, a ruse had been crafted, an itinerary had been scheduled and teary partings were made by the ladies in regard to Fatticus, who had been convinced that, were he to go along with their plan, the cat would be rewarded with much tuna, the likes of which he had never before imagined, never mind witnessed.

His friend Cleopawtra had also told him that he would receive some well-deserved forehead washing and appreciative nuzzling; frankly, he anticipated that even more.

The kindly, older gentleman had wound his way up the staircase, destined to deny others what he had himself been refused, happiness. Once he had been chosen for the accursed program, the German army had wrenched his family away from him; his wife and children had been told that he was a coward, a murderer that had shot his superior officer, and ran screaming from the battlefield. Now, he was known in Germany only as a deserter, with no friends left to help him, and no relatives willing to lend him aid.

He was entirely alone. All he had was the Feline Remote Intelligence Gathering Service, and now, compliments of the Hawthorns, he did not have even the comfort of that.

What only remained was his lust for revenge, a want for vengeance that was not to be his that morning as he found himself, after his discreet entry to the flat, set upon by two furious housekeepers, a Chinese greengrocer and a physician, each hoping to settle a score. Fritz had managed to escape, battered and bruised from the rash of bodily violence that was inflicted upon his person, fleeing like a scared animal down the staircase and running from the flat; his tormenters took futile chase after the much speedier spy.

He had fallen into a trap, and it had appeared that neither the Hawthorn woman nor her cat were in attendance, likely Fritz realized in retrospect the young woman and infant that he had examined, but allowed to pass electing, in the event that they had not been his desired targets, to avoid advertising his presence with further scrutiny.

The troublesome pair could be anywhere, and it would take the sum total of the rogue operative's many years of experience in order to find them. Nevertheless, Fritz was on a mission; nothing would stop him, certainly not two housekeepers, a Chinese fellow and a doctor who repeatedly failed to mind his own business.

For their part, the trio had taken great satisfaction from their assault upon the vile individual, the unpleasant character who had slain Missus Glenferrie's employer and greatest friend. They enjoyed beating the man who had given Missus Tottenham a nasty bump on the head, and that had thrust the physician aside as if he was of no consequence, making Brunswick feel weak and helpless to his depraved whims.

It had been a shame that Fritz fled before he was entirely incapacitated, for they would have tied him up and delivered him to the Yard, the case emphatically closed. Sadly, it was not to be.

They had concluded their pursuit at the level of the street, having discovered the poor policeman, knocked senseless by the pitiful excuse of a human they had taken earlier to pummelling. While the ladies tended to the

fallen officer, Doctor Brunswick stood in quiet prayer. He made known to the sky his deepest hopes, that Fritz would be unable to acquire the author's trail, that she would be free to make her journey without his rude interruption and that the final chapter would, on the strange tale of Caroline and Fatticus, close peacefully.

Cleopawtra made her feline assurances to Francis, those consisting of purring and nuzzles, that his message had been delivered. He prayed as well, that his beloved Caroline had discovered its meaning, and that she would be permitted to find her way to the town where, for the first time in so many unhappy years, they would blissfully meet.

Plans initiated so long ago were coming to fruition, and they would soon have a new life, a resumption of the one that had been so brutally suspended. The world would finally be made right once again; they would spend the rest of their lives together with no further hiatus.

No one and not a single thing would ever again come between Francis and Caroline; the love that they shared would radiate until the end of time.

Fatticus happily played with the carefully placed toy. His booty and glove covered paws made it difficult for him to obtain a grip on the object of his fascination, and resulted in it idly bouncing two and fro, perpetually continuing his amusement. Meanwhile, the well-disguised Caroline wheeled him carefully throughout the streets of London; her intention was to board a hired car, previously arranged to take them both to the train station where they would embark upon their impending excursion to France.

The feline was rather excited at the concept that he would physically encounter Cleopawtra, should the cat from his dreams that had been adamant she was real truly exist. It was a notion of which the suspicious Fatticus was not entirely convinced, but optimistic. If her claim was genuine, then he was certain to be sufficiently compensated for his patience in tolerating all of this disruption to his life. If it were not so, he would be one very upset ginger-tabby; he preferred not to think of such a travesty.

He reconsidered. She must be there; it was the only possible outcome, since the world only existed to please Fatticus. The events of late had merely been unfortunate discrepancies. Those aberrations, once he and his handsome associate were united, would soon be forgiven. That was an occasion he had decided ought to occur promptly. It was owed to him by the powers-that-be to, as quickly as possible, correct their dreadful mistakes.

While he continued to contemplate upon his theories regarding the natural balancing of life, Caroline and Fatticus boarded the hired car, and began their journey to meet Francis and Cleopawtra.

If Caroline had been asked, she would have been totally incapable of explaining just how it could be that she was so confident her love would be waiting for her there in Elbeuf. Indeed, she was so convinced of it that had she been forced, she would have swam the frigid English Channel in order to reach her goal. There was no obstacle large enough to prevent her passage, and no argument persuasive enough to deter her from her firmly set course.

She would, the woman would insist, soon be there; as would he, and the couple would both of them be finally happy again, blissfully together, the two humans and their pair of felines, their long narrative concluded.

General Belgrave, in the meantime and much to his immense contentment accomplished his greatest military achievement by finally convincing the Army that the measures he had advanced to them regarding the current situation be deployed. The Feline Remote Intelligence Gathering Service then commenced upon a frenzied, but smartly organized relocation to a new facility; all of its operatives were sent urgent dispatches ordering them to abandon their current assignments and, as the integrity of their operations had been compromised by the escape of the rogue operative GT Ninety-Nine, take to new locations.

Francis, although he was only aware of his directive to relocate, and the rudimentary information Cleopawtra had been able to obtain from Fatticus, felt optimistic that this would prove to be quite a promising development; he did not have the luxury of knowing the entire truth. However, he had a pleasant notion that, once they had reunited and he had capitalized on this opportunity to abandon his life as a spy, he and his wife would no longer face any further threat from the British military. He would rejoin, with his dearest Caroline, a relative life of normalcy.

The only possible shadow that still lurked in their otherwise bright future was the delinquent Fritz, who was presently searching desperately to find those who had only temporarily evaded him. The seriously slighted gentleman would strive to exact his retribution from them until he took his last breath.

Caroline and Francis were both well aware that the demented German was still involved in his hunt for them. They knew that it was only a matter of time before they would have the misfortune to encounter him again.

The only real questions were where they would find him, when that would be, and would be required of them to defeat him.

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE TUNA OF HIS EYES

CAROLINE WOULD USE PENCIL AND PAPER to recount Fatticus's dream, the one he had imagined while in the custody of the military, whilst they were in transit to reunite with her one true love.

Charlie was gravely regretting his lamentable decision.

His stomach churned violently as he cowered beneath the galley table, itself below the decks of the fishing vessel 'Bait and Tackle;' the ship was presently being tossed about, as if it was a toy mouse facing the brutality of his own paws, by the tempest in whose clutches it was held.

The cat desperately wished that, rather than being there, he had been elsewhere, at a location far removed from the disastrous situation into which he had placed himself. The feline's original aspirations were long since abandoned and forgotten; now, his only remaining concern was to avoid the manifestly certain fate of drowning in the cold, dark seas that surrounded him.

The cries and shouts of humans caught unaware by the incredibly sudden onset of the storm increased in urgency and panic while the scene became progressively more desperate. The calico, his long fur a mixture of patches of brown, black, grey and white, had been foraging for morsels lost on the gently rolling deck of the abandoned galley, when suddenly there had then been nothing other than turmoil and chaos.

The crew had attempted to weather the typhoon that beset them, as if from nothing, with all of their skill; however, the net had failed to be brought aboard in time, and would serve as the ironic instrument of their imminent destruction.

The cat had stowed away, crept on board the coal steamer to help himself to some fresh fish; it would be the best, he had imagined, that he

would ever taste. For many years, the feline spent much of his time gazing out of the windows of his seaside home, marvelling as the fishing boats came into dock at the pier below and offloaded their precious cargoes, a veritable bounty of mackerel and tuna, the two joys of his existence.

One day, he had vowed, he would venture forth with those intrepid explorers and witness, for himself, the source of his happiness; then, he would partake in the maritime vegetables, freshly picked from their oceanic garden, their beautiful aromas not yet hampered by the encasing, by the cannery that inhabited the village's shore, of steel around them.

The cat clung tenuously to the lone post that supported the top of the table under which he hid, while the ship appeared to spin in circles, as if a waterspout had taken hold of the boat and was twirling it around like a child's toy top. Cutlery crashed in their drawers; pots and pans clattered together, creating an anarchy of percussion that only worsened the feline's tender condition.

The adventure he had experienced, from his home down to the docks during one recent, late evening, had been a journey all of its own. An encounter with a raccoon had nearly brought his mission to a premature end; a dog had almost convinced him to make a hasty retreat to his sanctuary, and lock his dreams into the cupboard that resided in the back of his mind for eternity, the cat to never consider another attempt at such a dangerous excursion again.

Despite all of this adversity, he had forged ahead, and soon found himself down upon the pier below; his choice of fishing vessels awaited him. His first preference was discovered to have contained a member of the canine persuasion; Charlie chose not to join on under a captain who had such obviously poor taste in crewmen. The second boat apparently had a feline crewmate already; although not sighting the cat directly, Charlie could smell him, and decided not to 'step on his toes,' preferring instead to leave the fortunate creature to his own, wondrous employ.

The third ship evidently carried neither feline nor canine; the calico happily piped himself quietly aboard, promptly finding a quiet place in which to keep his presence obscured from the humans. He sequestered himself within a tiny cavity beneath the bench seat that surrounded the table in the galley, until the vessel was far away from land; following his self-initiated detection, the crew would have no option but to accept his arbitrary enlistment in their ranks, and allow him to fulfil his fantasies.

It would not be too long, perhaps a day whilst the 'Bait and Tackle' made its way out to sea, before his excitement would overtake his

discretion and he would make his presence proudly known. One crewmate was familiar with the stowaway feline, the man an acquaintance of the cat's guardians; he had known the calico's name and, when a decision regarding his future aboard was to be made, spoken on Charlie's behalf.

It was eventually agreed that their uninvited guest would be tolerated for just this one voyage, but that, lest he meet his untimely end overboard, he was to stay in the galley at all times.

He had planned to compromise after the fact; that is, Charlie would later escape from his confinement and seek out his freshly netted quarry, deep within the hold of the ship where, perhaps, thousands of fish lay waiting for his valued appraisal. However, Mother Nature had chosen to frustrate his endeavours and firmly cement this nasty roadblock in the way of his culinary pursuits.

He hung on to the pole for dear life while the wood-and-iron vessel groaned horribly, declaring its dire threat to burst into a thousand pieces, as it continued to be tossed about by the angry seas that gripped the boat within their watery hands.

Mere hours before, the crew had happily gathered around the galley table, toasting the end to a fruitful day's fishing; the ships holds were well on their way to being filled to capacity for when the crew would make their triumphant return to the little seaside town that both they, and Charlie, called their home.

The cat had revelled in the jovial mood, becoming the subject of many a treat and kind hand, and it seemed as if all of their plans would proceed without disruption; he would get his wish, and the feline would soon be frolicking in his heaven of fish. No one had any notion, especially not Charlie, of their impending misfortune; there was no feeling amongst them that such trouble laid so closely ahead in their path.

Yet, here they were now, fighting for their lives in a battle with an ocean that had turned treacherous, and chosen to no longer favour them with fortune but, rather, punish them with suffering. Charlie had long since, and quite involuntarily, regurgitated his treats, much to his considerable disgust; his seasickness had incapacitated him, and left him helpless. The feline remained stranded beneath the galley table, whilst the humans toiled to save their souls from a fate, in the frigid depths, of the waters far below.

Charlie desperately wanted to turn back the clock, reverse all of his unfortunate decisions and return to his window, gazing out upon the pier,

quite satisfied to permit the humans to bring the fish to him; he would have no further thoughts of venturing forth to harvest it himself. The cat was convinced that his carelessness would soon mean not only his ruination, but the finish of all those poor humans trapped aboard the cursed ship with him; he was certain that the vessel would, at any moment, tear itself asunder, and place them all into the fateful custody of the vengeful seas that sought their cruel demise.

Shouts from above had indicated that the ship faced grave danger from its own net; the weave of ropes, fully laden with fish, was being tugged at sharply by the strong currents that moved below, the ship drawn along with it for a most undesirable jaunt. Unfortunately, the winch that secured its lines was swinging most violently to and fro as well, and its chaotic movements made it far too dangerous to approach.

One, or perhaps two of the crew had already been severely injured, Charlie had noted, in their attempts to reach the controls that would allow the tether to be released; the captain had shouted that he would not tolerate his men risking their lives any further in their efforts to permit the fishing boat to run free.

Thunder and lightning punctuated the sombre narrative of their gloomy circumstance, the angered gods of the sea expressing succinctly their displeasure at the uninvited intrusion of the feline interloper that had thoughtlessly elected to tread upon their sacred waters. Charlie made rather profuse apologies while he strove to maintain his hold upon the table leg, and begged them to grant a favourable outcome to the ship and its crew.

Charlie wished for the seas to abate as suddenly as they had began to churn, and that no evidence would remain that any such incident had ever taken place. The wooden ship groaned once again, followed by the splintering sound of timber soon to submit to the relentless forces acting upon it, dashing any hope that remained within his heart. Most certainly, they would all perish.

It was fitting, perhaps, that his gruesome fate would all be for want of fish. Charlie would never eat another gill-endowed creature again; he swore an oath on it. The food was utterly distasteful to him; his previous fascination with the scrumptious seafood was nothing more than an evil, vile mistress, one that had tempted him into her den of destruction, to then take retribution upon him for his crimes of gluttony. He would restrict himself to consuming animals that lived on land; denizens of the nice, firm dirt that did not generally move about so viciously, solid earth that was not

so wet and cold, and did not threaten to kill those who tread upon it merely in search of sustenance.

He had come to the distinct conclusion that fishing simply failed to be worth all of the trouble, and he would no longer partake in any facet of such a perilous enterprise. If he could only be permitted to walk away, simply depart the ship, leave it to its grim fate and make his way back home, returning to the house that looked down upon the pier, then he would be safe and this whole nasty business would fade away. It would become an unwanted memory, seldom reflected upon, until it no longer troubled him with its ugliness.

He could not so easily depart, of course; the fate of the ship was to be shared with his own destiny; its survival directly related to his own.

Thoughts of began to surface within Charlie's mind of mounting his own expedition, an endeavour to reach the switch whose activation would liberate the ship from its fatal condition, but he was quite reluctant to entertain them. It seemed a rather implausible notion that he could even convince himself to release his grip upon the table, never mind the numerous proceeding steps that would be required in order to attain such a lofty ambition.

It would be a much better use of his remaining time to contemplate the meaning of his all too short existence, lest he be questioned, after this terrible tragedy had reached its rapidly nearing finale, regarding same in whatever afterlife he hoped await him. Despite this sane rationale, his mind eventually relented to the consideration of a possible attempt.

Charlie would be required to mount the staircase that emerged, from the galley, onto the exposed deck above; his claws would likely rip free from his poor paws due to the stressors that would be suffered upon them by the same forces that cruelly persisted upon buffeting the boat. Assuming he had success in his ascent and found himself topside, he would then need to carefully make his way to the rear of the vessel, where the winch was purportedly located.

Along the perilous route, the feline must avoid being tossed overboard by the howling winds, or assaulted by the wayward pieces of equipment that, at the behest of the awesome forces that had command of them, were throwing themselves about the ship, from stem to stern.

Contrary to his common sense, who felt it best to leave the matter well enough alone, Charlie could not help but visualize his proposed expedition to the release mechanism, one in which, he imagined, that he

would be triumphant, and free the ship from the tuna-laden burden that hung around its metaphorical neck. The cat would be hailed as a hero, and pampered for the rest of his life, the remainder of which to be spent quite firmly on dry land; he would be celebrated as one who had the courage to take matters into his own paws, and rescue the ship and its crew from their heartbreaking demise.

His bravery began to build; the feline prepared to release the hold he had upon his anchor and cast himself adrift, the calico set to navigate a course for victory.

Then, the ship was nearly flipped completely upside down, flung up into the air so abruptly that Charlie's stomach had failed to recognize the event had even occurred until well after the vessel struck the surface of the sea below once more. The eulogy for his aspirations was a brief and concise one, "We are gathered here today to mourn the death of a silly cat's fancy, a notion that served only to epitomize feline foolishness, and it will not be, even remotely, missed."

He faced a mortal conundrum; that his death would come as a result of current events was almost a certainty, but his demise as a consequence of his attempt to prevent such a lethal calamity appeared to be even more likely. The cat considered that, perhaps, once the vessel finally broke apart in response to the storm's unrelenting turbulence, he would remain fastened to the table after it was torn free of the ship. Maybe those that had predestined his fate would permit him to survive, the feline floating adrift on the ocean upon the former galley fixture, until rescue chose to present itself.

Alternatively, he would be pulled down to the darkness of the sea floor along with the table, the leg and the ship to which it was fastened. It was impossible for the frightened little calico to find any firm resolution in any of these probabilities; only one thing became apparent. He was, to paraphrase a human expression, 'damned if he did, and doomed if he did not.'

The shouting of the crewmen had disturbingly ceased; no sound, other than the increasing complaints uttered by the ship, and the roaring of the tempest that inflicted its tortures upon the poor vessel, could be heard by the feline; that was certainly not a favourable sign. He made his decision; he would make the attempt.

The cat prayed then for a pause, a period of calm in the storm that would be sufficient for the feline to traverse the distance, from the crewmen's table to which he currently clung, up the galley stairs, across

the deck and to the stern of the ship. There, he could activate the switch and secure not only his safety but the welfare of those who, he hoped, still remained aboard their much-maligned vessel.

It seemed as if countless hours had passed with no response to his appeals, and then the lightening and the thunder eased, but only slightly; the tumultuous movements of the ship lost a mere fraction of their violent vigour. However, the cat felt it was all the reprieve that he was liable to be granted; Therefore, he longingly relinquished his grip upon the post, and steadied his weary legs on the deck of the galley in preparation for his quest.

His time could not be squandered; the storm was prone to bring a return of its former fury at any instant, and the cat would not make the shameful mistake of underestimating the power of the sea any further. He ran, or rather scrambled, as that was all his disoriented paws would allow, to the staircase that led to the tempest up above and struggled to pull himself up what was truly nothing more than an angled ladder. Each step led to its own celebration, as he inched closer to a direct confrontation with the forces of nature that had prompted him to take such bold action.

He pulled, dragged, heaved and hauled himself up the stairs, and soon the cat had conquered his first obstacle; Charlie was exposed to the elements on the outside deck, his reward to be quickly blanketed by the torrential rain that then fell in sheets over him. He precariously slipped about the topside of the ship, his claws providing little assistance in securing him to the vessel; he became nothing more than a furry pinball on a table controlled by a sadistic deity.

His frantic motions granted him some minor control over the direction of his movements, and he gained ground with painful persistence; the thunder and lightening soon increased in frequency, and the storm threatened to regain its former glory, putting an end to his ill-conceived venture. Illuminated by the flashes of light, Charlie was able to recognize the figures of his human companions; in a bid to avert their loss overboard, they had lashed themselves to fixtures on the deck up above, having found themselves unable to return to the shelter of the quarters, below.

The cat was concerned that he, too, might meet such an unhappy end, but he was spurred on with the knowledge that the fate of not only himself, but the rest of the crew, was in his paws. The human's desperate efforts to survive would unquestionably come to naught if Charlie was unable to release the fishing net, and cast off the weight that permitted the sea to persist in its efforts to wreak havoc upon the ship, the vessel that

protected those aboard it from eternal imprisonment in the ocean's cold, dark waters.

As he struggled against the elements, the events of his brief life began to play out before his eyes; he saw his mother, who had comforted him when he was a kitten, and had reassured him after his nightmares. She would insist that he was safe, and that no harm would ever come to him. Her presence there, in his mind, warmed him in his wretched misery, and he continued his journey down Memory Lane, reflecting on the kind humans who had adopted him, the older couple that, he sadly understood, his selfishness had surely caused great distress. He saw those that, he knew, he loved very much and would give anything to be with again, to be given a kind word and their loving touch.

Charlie would atone for his sins, and he would perform whatever services were required of him in order to return to those who loved him. He thoroughly disparaged himself for his impertinence, the curse that plagued his existence paling in comparison to the one he placed upon himself, and he steadfastly resumed his battle with the forces that worked against him, gradually making his advance on the rear of the 'Bait and Tackle.'

The storm seemed to take notice of his efforts, and began to revisit its former wrath; as a result, his progress became increasingly more urgent. The awful chorus of the wind and rain steadily rose to a howl as the cat crept slowly towards the wildly swinging arm with which he would fight, in a desperate bid to activate its crucial mechanism and release the now-detrimental fishing net.

The wet and weary calico cat, his muscles crying out in agony over what they had been forced to endure, approached the ferocious iron beast with an overwhelming sense of purpose; the winch called upon the cat to make his challenge, and lock into a battle of wills with the possessed piece of machinery. Charlie called on what remaining strength he had within him, and made his charge at the metallic monster, frantically grasping at its base, and taking hold before he was swept off the stern of the vessel and into the frenzied, frigid waters below.

As if on queue, the typhoon resumed its full fury and suddenly, Charlie found himself on an impromptu roller coaster ride; the simple act of holding onto the winch demanding all the stamina he had remaining to the cat and indebting him even further. He would soon fail; the crew would die, their ship destroyed, and his humans would never hear from Charlie again.

It was entirely his fault; his greed had swept him away from them, but he had been a willing accomplice. He ought never have elected to reject the life that he had been given, and gone against the wishes of those powers that held authority over his fragile feline future.

Charlie decided that it would actually be quite proper to condemn the cat to face the ultimate penalty, and seize from him that which he risked so frivolously, but to take the lives of the humans, and destroy their ship would be a grave injustice. Indeed, it would be grossly unfair to punish those members of the crew that had committed no such wrongs, and thwart his efforts to save them; the feline must be permitted to make right the terrible events he was convinced had occurred on his behalf.

He prayed with all of his heart, that his plea would be heard and that the storm would provide him with such an opportunity. The cat only wanted to know that, regardless of his fate, he could be confident that his indiscretions would not result in the deaths of those who had made the trivial error of welcoming him aboard their floating home.

His petition was summarily granted; much to his tremendous relief the sea grew eerily silent, but he knew it would be only for a moment. The court had ordered a brief recess, to allow the cat to leap up onto the control panel and press the 'emergency release' button, the switch that would send the weight that shackled the vessel into the depths far below, and free the ship from its bonds.

Charlie sardonically mourned the loss of all the tuna and, as his respite came to an end, the judgment was summarily delivered; he was violently thrown free of the winch and cast towards the deck, his awareness of reality concluding with one final, painful impact with the unforgiving iron plating below.

The calico dreamt then; his visions were of a great celebration. His mother was there, to praise him for his heroic efforts; his guardians stroked him gently and, happy to see his homecoming, informed the errant cat that they had forgiven him for running away. For saving the lives of the 'Bait and Tackle's' crew, they were all so very proud of Charlie.

He had a profound sense of peace; his brief, but extraordinary struggle had come to a close. The winch was under the strain of its burden no longer, and the ship did not face the danger of being broken apart; the storm had eased, and the ship then returned safely to port. Charlie was sheltered within his home in the village above once more, the feline to never stray away from it again.

The particulars regarding the release of the winch comprised a curious mystery to the relieved crew; the storm had passed over them, and the sun happily shone upon their aimlessly drifting vessel. Regrettably, their celebrations were stifled when the sad muddle of a cat was discovered on the aft deck, bleeding and battered; the feline was unconscious but still breathing. Conjecture as to his part in their survival became rampant, but unproven.

The humans performed all the miracles of which they were capable in order to stop his bleeding, and make the broken creature comfortable but, in their veterinary expertise, the crew was quite limited. Furthermore, the storm-ravaged ship could only limp its way back to port at a much-reduced speed, and its wireless facilities were rendered irreparable by the tempest it had been so fortunate to survive.

Unable to find any other, more plausible explanation, Charlie was quickly established to have been their saviour, and the comatose feline was graced, during his triumphant voyage home, with a constant companion by his side. His crewmates told to him tales of previous battles the ship had endured with the sea, recounted fairytales, regarding mermaids or serpents, and related whatever else the humans could think of in order to pass the time, while they waited for their cherished cat to revive.

The crew all took their turns, stroking Charlie gently whilst they prayed for the poor cat; they pleaded with the powers above that the stowaway that had fought so hard to rescue them, would himself be saved. The crew wished that their hero would regain his strength and wake up, to eat and drink the rewards that they would hoist upon him for his valiant endeavours in keeping them all secure from the ills of the sea.

Meanwhile, Charlie remained in his perfect world, with his mother and his guardians, where there was never a thunderclap or a lightning bolt, neither wind nor rain. The sun always shone, the bird's songs never ceased, and there would always be a lap nearby, one upon which the happy calico could catch a quick nap; his slumbers to occur both before, and after a tasty meal of beef, or chicken, but never fish.

The ships came and went from the pier below, but he paid them little heed, choosing instead to focus on savouring his wondrous life within the walls of the house he called his home, and enjoying the existence he had a newfound appreciation for, one that he would never consider turning his back on again.

Perhaps that perfect world was his reward, for it was where he would live out the rest of his days; the cat that was the hero of his seafaring

village never made a return to consciousness. However, the retelling of his brave tale to any nautical soul would result in their great adoration and respect, and soon the calico became known to the maritime world as Charles, the patron saint of hapless fisherman.

It quickly became a common myth that, should a crew inexplicably survive certain disaster, the spirit of the feline was the entity responsible for their fortune, and he should be thanked for his aid in a proper fashion.

Those that he saved were to recite a poem.

“Down to the sea did the calico go,
To be tossed about, thrown to and fro.

The seafaring cat was lost in the night,
Unwilling to surrender to woe nor fright,

He would take to task what need be done,
The courageous feline would be the one,

To save the ship, and rescue its crew,
St. Charles may, one day, save you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE PARISIAN ENCOUNTER

FATTICUS WAS IN FRANCE! It had taken several nauseating hours, but the tabby had finally conquered his motion sickness, and was rather enjoying the remainder of his journey. Travel had been established as quite an engaging pursuit by the typically housebound pussycat; the never-ending stream of new sights and sounds provided, for the inquisitive feline, a fountain of entertainment.

Indeed, he could fathom the idea of ‘living a life out of a suitcase,’ even though he did not have one; there was so very much to see, to smell, to taste and to nibble on.

They had given the fetid Fritz ‘the slip,’ having ventured by rail and then by ship across the English channel; the pair then boarded another train to the beautiful city of Paris, from which they would make their way up the river Seine where, Caroline hoped most dearly, she was to finally be reunited with her beloved Francis.

Unfortunately, by the hour they had arrived, in the town renowned for romance, the final service had already departed, and so they took up a room for the night on the fourth floor of the modest L’Hotel de Burgundy, not too far from the station to wait out the evening until morning, when the schedule would resume.

Fatticus had been relieved of his infant apparel, but had only partially taken to the leash; poor Caroline was forced to carry him like a spoilt child. His fat belly hung down, and his legs dangled aimlessly below that; the tabby’s tail nearly reached the ground. There had been some argument regarding his transportation; concerns were expressed regarding the cleanliness of the cat, but Caroline had consistently won out, choosing to feign indignance that anyone would dare to question the sanitary habits of her perfectly polite pussycat.

Nary a child could walk by without assaulting Fatticus with cuddles and kisses, a ritual to which the feline was growing quite fond; the king-sized tabby permitted the children to pat his huge tummy and, if they came close enough to allow it, licked them on the nose spawning, on the part of the travelling youngsters, giggles and laughter. He could have never conceived of such amusement on his own, and although he had felt safe within his tower in the sky, he was forced to admit that surrendering some of that security was, for the freedom of experiencing the joys that the rest of the civilized world had to offer, an equitable exchange.

The waiter on the train to Paris served him goat's milk and pâté; the former of which his opinion was uncertain, but with the latter he had fallen in love. The feline could be quite the gourmet should he choose to. It was a prime mission of his to sample all things edible so that, purely as a courtesy for others, he could assess them; there was no shortage of tasty morsels for him to evaluate. Caroline was by no means the staunchest advocate for French cuisine; she much preferred her traditional English fare, so this created plenty a leftover for her grateful glutton.

It had been a long, arduous day; Caroline and Fatticus retired to their room, registered under the name of Mary Camberwell, to rest in preparation for the further adventures that lay ahead. The author still remained on the verge of shock; her rational side found her recent actions to be quite incomprehensible, and questioned her sanity at every possible opportunity, whilst her fancy urged her onward. Her emotional sensibilities demanded compensation for the previous decade of grief and depression; her feelings ran amuck on the chance, the likelihood, even, dare she hope, the certainty that her true love would be there, waiting to hold her and comfort her as he had before, for now, and forever.

The room held both wine and cheese. The woman found the French intoxication to be quite palatable and enjoyed it while the fermented cream was left for the cat to consume in moderation; Caroline likened the smell of the Brie to a combination of dirty socks, and malodorous men. The alcohol quickly worked its magic upon the sleep deprived woman; she took to her bed for the evening, admonishing Fatticus to keep himself from engaging in troublesome activities, and respect the hotel of which they were guests by not embarking upon any of his frequent feline exploits during the night.

"Behave," she told him simply.

The cat, once again far too agitated to sleep, promptly stationed himself in the window; he gazed out over the city around him, and marvelled at the many lights. Paris was, for the Christmas that was fast approaching, in full decoration. Fatticus then looked down below, for several minutes or perhaps hours, upon the various people who came and went from the hotel; there were smart men in top

hats, ladies with fancy bonnets, chefs with gigantic marshmallow tops and waiters with greasy, slicked back hair.

As well, there was, and of this Fatticus was quite certain, the contemptible gentleman who had kidnapped him on not one, but two separate occasions, imprisoning him and failing to accommodate his litany of needs in any reasonable fashion.

His fair Lady Caroline sleeping soundly, having been thoroughly exhausted by the day's events was in no condition to contend with the fiend that curiously had successfully located them. Perhaps it had been the man at the station who had suggested the hotel to them; the evil agent may have garnered the information based on their description. Fatticus made for a sight that was quite difficult to forget, especially when he was being ported about like a two year old.

Nevertheless, it did not really matter; the simple fact was that the horrid fellow was there, and Fatticus would be forced to deal with him.

Doors had appeared to no longer present an insurmountable obstacle to the cat, but he still had not completely mastered the ability to transit through them; his attempts generally ended in both bruised noses and egos. He had begun, however, to correlate the relationship of his distraction to the success of his wood-walking abilities and, his facility to daydream eagerly offering its assistance in the matter, he would proceed to implement that procedure now.

Fatticus was to charge at the door and, before he ineffectually engaged the immovable object in an unfortunate manner, he would take his mind elsewhere, the trivial item then ignored, and hopefully inconsequential to him.

The first attempt was an abysmal failure, the sickening thud of fat meeting maple made nearly enough noise to wake the slumbering Caroline but, to the great relief of the embarrassed ginger-tabby, it was not sufficient. He had returned to reality at the last conceivable instant, and the door was made solid once more; it then punished poor Fatticus for his misbehaviour with an absolute lack of forgiveness.

That would not happen again; at least, that was his plan and he would not stray from it.

It was the second round and the cat, again encouraging his mind to float away to loftier locations, launched himself at the door once more. This occasion, he contemplated on Cleopawtra, the tabby literally of his dreams, who was always there to aid, console, and nurture him.

He was not quite sure of exactly how he thought of the female feline; in a way, she was his surrogate mother but, at the same time, he found the older cat to

be quite attractive to him. In either event, he desired a future with her, and Fatticus rather hoped that she was real and, when he and his Lady Caroline terminated their travels there, he would meet her in Elbeuf.

In the short term, however, he must contend with the despicable devil that was heading, presumably, in his general direction. The door had been successfully surmounted; all he need do was wait and, whilst his foe ascended the staircase to meet him, prepare for battle. Fatticus soon sensed the vindictive villain's approach; he stood his ground while the sad example of a man made his way up the remaining flight of stairs, his guise of a French maître-d quite unconvincing to the cat that had been reluctantly forced to know the operative a little too well for his liking.

Fritz spied Fatticus there, casually lounging upon the fourth floor landing of the Parisian hotel and, despite his best efforts at containment, his rage for the animal blossomed; the obese creature persisted to stare at the operative with contempt, and accentuate his opinion with another of his infuriating snoughs.

Earlier in the evening, while he waited in a Parisian café and ruminated to the mellow sounds of soft jazz piano, Fritz had resolved to put his temper, regarding the cat, aside and focus, instead, on his human target. Unfortunately, the rogue agent lost his battle to retain his emotional control; he would tear the cat apart, and feast on his fatty flesh like a savage, his desire for revenge satiated with the consumption of his enemy in a close facsimile of a blood-frenzied, paganistic ritual.

The human's lust for violence, as Fritz advanced upon the one that he blamed for his downfall more than he did any other, was displayed quite plainly in his eyes.

Fatticus decided that, perhaps, that was an excellent moment to carry on, and with great urgency, he commanded his rear haunches to propel him forward. The tremendous momentum provided by his weight served to act as if he was a gigantic, furry bowling ball that then rolled, across the floor, to greet the shins of the one who desired to do the rotund feline unspeakable harm.

Fritz exclaimed a most colourful expletive, and then fell to his knees; the fur-bearing behemoth continued on his course, down the brightly carpeted stairs, and quickly descended away from the proficiently cussing lunatic.

The rogue agent utterly lost what little remained of his decorum and, howling in rage in a poignant imitation of an incensed wolf, he struck the lathe and plaster wall, cracking it in a display of primal anger. That was all he could possibly stand; he no longer cared about the Hawthorns. All he could see, in his frustrated mind, was that horribly grotesque cat, that interloper who had fouled

up his life, torn apart his existence and then tossed it in the rubbish bin as if he was worth nothing.

He leapt to his feet and, in heated pursuit of the feline object of his sinister desires, dashed away down the stairs. The cat proved to be much more effective at negotiating the numerous humans that he encountered, during his descent of the steps, than the somewhat less-graceful Fritz, who rudely shoved aside all of those who stood in his path, save one elderly woman who voiced her disapproval of his antics by mating her rather heavy handbag with his head.

Fatticus did not intend to elude Fritz; his mission was to lure the man away from his Lady Caroline, and then endeavour to engineer his doom. Therefore, the cat, in order to allow the struggling operative to remain closely behind, was required to slow his ostensible flight.

The concierge was astonished when first feline, then human, burst past him, emerging from the hotel entrance into the street, where Fatticus abruptly lunged across the road, in front of an approaching motorcar and narrowly escaping serious injury. The chase carried on down the boulevard; Fritz fruitlessly called for the tabby, in several different languages, to cease his “hopeless” efforts to escape whilst passers-by could only watch, and wonder just what was amiss with the man to prompt him to demean himself in such an uncouth fashion as to holler obscenities after a pussycat.

The spectacle carried on, for countless blocks, along brightly lit avenues and dimly illuminated alleys; Fatticus searched for any obstacle with which he could complicate the crazed man’s efforts to capture the fleeing feline. The cat compared Fritz to a dog; no matter what challenge was placed in front of him, the unsophisticated creature would utilize simple brute force and inelegant gymnastics in order to further the pursuit of the prey upon whose scent he was dedicated. His single-minded sense of purpose was both his greatest weapon and, perhaps, his largest weakness.

Unfortunately for the cunning cat, attempts at introducing the rogue agent to the grill of a still-moving motorcar failed; the feline’s carefully calculated forays into traffic were insufficient to bring an end to the insanity. It would be a policeman, who had felt there was something certainly not right about the situation that, forcing Fritz to a halt and once more frustrating his attempts to capture Fatticus, would finally bring the chase to an aborted conclusion.

Not willing to risk the quagmire he would likely encounter should he choose to publicly assault the officer, the operative yielded to his order, but only whilst his mind was already in the process of formulating yet another dastardly plan for revenge.

Fatticus, free of the, at least momentarily, detained Fritz quickly realized, after his impromptu celebration was over, that he had a rather serious problem. His efforts to confuse the operative as to his location had been equally as productive on the feline. Fatticus was well and truly lost; he had absolutely no idea where he was, where he needed to be or how he could traverse between these two points. It was a terrible travesty. He had outsmarted himself, and was alone in a sea of lights, each one meaningless to him, without name or association.

Much to his great surprise, the desperate cat successfully climbed a tree; Fatticus met an unpleasant encounter with an angered pigeon, but eventually rose up to the highest branch that would support him, from which the feline could survey the city, and make a concerted effort to find the hotel that currently housed his Lady Caroline.

It seemed hopeless; there were so many buildings on numerous blocks that they stretched as far out as he could see; there was precious little probability he would be capable of identifying that one structure from so many. Fatticus was crestfallen; he had been inadvertently defeated by his opponent, and made to face his torrid loneliness once more.

The night would proceed, with the crafty Fritz endeavouring to convince the French police that he was merely a maître d'hôtel with a disobedient pet, and the slumbering Caroline dreaming of a wonderfully romantic reunification with her long lost husband, unaware that, finally, her poor Fatticus was making a sad vigil up an unknown tree. The cat searched amongst a galaxy of stars for the one whose twinkle cast itself upon his human guardian, the light by which he could be guided back to her, and feel safe in her arms once more.

Overtaken by fatigue, Fatticus soon nestled down on the branch, as best he could, in an effort to negotiate some sorely needed rest. He would wait for the morning, when the cat would be aided by the daylight; then, a new mission would be undertaken, one to retrace his steps and rejoin his mistress once more. Fritz, too, patiently anticipated the dawn, the time when he would likely be fined for 'public presentation as a buffoon' and released. Free to carry out his next heinous plot he, at long last, would then mete out his own self-imposed justice, for the sake of himself, and the benefit of all those that the larcenous Hawthorns had betrayed.

The night wore on, and the sun eventually rose, liberating both man and cat from prison and tree, respectively. The judge admonished Fritz for his immature behaviour, and punished him with a modest financial penalty; the rogue agent was cordial and quite cooperative. His deception of the Parisian constabulary proved to be an overwhelming success. Fatticus, in the meantime, climbed down from his tree, and strove to obtain his bearings; he hoped to make some sense of the structures Cleopawtra had shown to him while he slept,

landmarks, she had told him, that he could employ in his effort to return to his dear Lady Caroline.

His guardian had awoken to discover that her feline was gone, with no clue left as to precisely how he had departed, and no reasonable method of explaining, to the Inspector that had answered her call, that the status of the door had no bearing on the feline's ability to leave the room. The police there, as with the law enforcement in England, could offer little consolation for the distraught woman, and were able only to point out the obvious; Paris was a large city, and Fatticus was only a cat.

She took some offence to this statement; the one thing Fatticus certainly was not was 'only a cat.' The writer bid the less-than-helpful officer adieu, and prepared to strike out for the train station, and Elbeuf beyond. Her confidence, that her ginger-tabby would again manage a miracle and return to her, was high; she was certain that they would be together once more, as Caroline would soon be with her true love Francis. She could not justify it, but she had strong convictions that all three of them would shortly be celebrating their reunion.

In the meantime, Fatticus was feverishly working his way across the city; landmarks were sighted that resembled those shown to him in his dreams, but they appeared in an incorrect order. He was uncertain of in which direction he was headed, if he was moving nearer the hotel, or drifting further afield. Cleopawtra had been unfamiliar with the particular establishment, and had only been able to direct Fatticus to a vague general area; the instructions proved to be woefully inadequate to permit the cat to return there. He abandoned the enterprise, and instead chose to direct his attention to the train station; his Lady Caroline, once she decided to resume her journey, was certain to return there.

It was not that Fritz was evil; no man is wicked within his own mind. Each decision is made with a demented variety of logic that, at least to him, seems sensible, and for the greater good. The rogue agent had concluded he would simply wait for Caroline Hawthorn at the station, and then shoot her dead, thus ridding the world of the co-conspirator, punishing the treacherous Francis Hawthorn for his disloyalty and providing a satisfying outcome, for the glory of the British Empire.

The operative departed on his human safari, unaware that the hunter had presently become the prey; Fatticus had stumbled upon the scheming spy during his own expedition across the Parisian landscape and, with the obvious notion that this terrible man was once again up to no particular good, had altered course.

The cat stalked him, while he arranged to acquire one of those ear-splitting contrivances that had done away with Hans, the fellow the great cat had mercilessly trampled. Fatticus found that, as Fritz moved his focus upon the train

station, his concerns began to mount; his intentions were apparent even to the ginger-tabby, the murderous glint in his eye clearly visible to even a not-quite-so plain pussycat.

Caroline Hawthorn sat on the platform and waited for her train to arrive, when she would board the carriage that would take her away from Paris and along the river to Elbeuf, where her destiny awaited her. She was growing quite impatient with Fatticus; his lack of appearance, coupled with the impending departure, combined to drive her annoyance to an intolerable level. She took to interrogating the station staff regarding large ginger-tabbies, but none of them had seen the plump feline and, mere minutes away from the time the train was scheduled to leave, her hopes for his miraculous arrival were beginning to fade.

Fritz strolled into the train station serenely; no attention was drawn to him as, in search of the author Hawthorn, the unassuming gentleman made his way from one platform to the next. Her destination was unknown, but her return here had been made certain by the testimony of a conductor, one who had directed the woman to her hotel the evening before. The man had known only that she was carrying on her journey by rail, but not to where she was to conclude it, leading Fritz to perform a tedious search of the crowded facility, hunting a quarry whose appearance was no longer known to him.

A compromise was made between the facade of a younger woman, the one which she had exploited in order to make her escape from London, and Caroline's drab, usual guise. A scarf was tied over her head, and dark glasses obscured her eyes in an effort to further thwart identification by the menacing Fritz, of whom she was quite certain she would soon have the misfortune of encountering.

Her colourful, floral dress with its positively ribald presentation of her naked shoulders only served to further discourage her association with the conservative novelist of whom she was generally known; it also made her quite chilly in the brusque winter air, and she shivered accordingly. Her only respite came in the form of a brass quartet that was stationed upon the platform; their rendition of the Overture from the Nutcracker Suite provided a welcomed, and warming, tone.

The rogue agent unwittingly strode past her two or three times; his suspicions were raised slightly by the mysterious woman, but not enough for him to take any action. Were he wrongly identify his prey, it would be utterly disastrous; his sacrifice would be in vain, his imprisonment and potential execution all for naught. It would be Fatticus who would provide him with the certainty he required; he would wait for the grotesque creature to appear, assured to lumber along the platform towards the Hawthorn woman as their train began

to board. The presence of the cat would seal her fate, the feline serving as the harbinger of her well-orchestrated demise.

Meanwhile, the cat's attempts to gain the attention of the policeman assigned to the station were not as profitable as he had hoped; Fatticus had laboured for several minutes in an effort to communicate with the mentally disadvantaged ape and, in order to foster some urgency on behalf of the officer, convey the tragedy that was about to occur. However, the man had paid the feline no heed and that, through the application of several sharp claws to the tender shin of the inattentive Frenchman, had forced the ginger-tabby to take a more direct approach.

It was not a perfect solution; Fatticus had become the target of the policeman's ire, not the homicidal spy as the cat might have hoped, but it would have to suffice. He scrambled off towards his imperilled Lady, his inbuilt compass easily able to locate her within the close confines of the station.

The most direct route was calculated and set as the tabby once again raced against time to foil the plot instigated by the murderous Fritz, to save his beloved guardian and put an end to this tiresome charade, once and for all.

Fatticus did indeed make it to Caroline in time; Fritz, weapon drawn, was set upon quite vigorously by the perforated policeman who had previously been in pursuit of the vicious tabby; that assault was forgotten, quite superseded by the sighting of a man with a pistol on the platform.

"Mon dieu!" the policeman quietly gasped, just prior to his quite punctual and rather capable suppression of the operative; the man was thrown down to the ground before he obtained any notion as to what had just occurred. His intense frustration then led him to vent his overwhelming emotions as if a petulant child. The subdued Fritz cried, and flailed his limbs against the pavement in a rousing tantrum, whilst the policeman sat upon him and called for his fellows to aid him in his apprehension.

The disguised Caroline Hawthorn quickly collected her wayward tabby, and made her way onto the train; considerations that the now-detained hooligan was, in truth, the former GT Ninety-Nine were only speculation, but she gave thanks that, whoever he might be, the pistol-wielding threat had been prevented from doing harm to whomever he had intended it.

Her greatest hope was that, had it been the fallen agent, this would be their last encounter with him; further interference in her affairs would likely force her to do away with him on her own, with Caroline throttling the arrogant bastard until no life was left to him.

The pair chose not to look upon the restrained criminal while the train pulled away from the station, and instead reflected on its destination, the small town of Elbeuf, on the river Seine, where the feline, and his human companion, had an appointment with their future.

It would be where the true reality of things would be finally displayed to them, in blazing Technicolor, and where, for better or worse, they would have all of their deepest questions answered.

The town of Elbeuf, the author was convinced, was where Caroline would finally have her first happy Christmas since Nineteen Hundred and Seventeen.

In addition, Fatticus hoped, there would be much more pâté.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

THE QUEEN, THE BEAST AND THE FIREPLACE

THIS IS HOW CAROLINE HAWTHORN'S premiere story had appeared in the Thomson Young Reader's Digest of Poetry and Prose.

If she had only paid attention, and heeded that sixth sense she was born with, perhaps things would have been different; as it was, the situation was rather grim.

She poked her nose out from under a branch, the one beneath which she hid, and took in a cold, winter breath. There seemed to be no sign of her pursuer; the air only smelt crisp, and was clean of any predators. She sighed, and allowed herself, for a brief moment, to relax.

It was cold, and wet; the winter snows were beginning to give way to spring. The melting ice, on the trees of fir and pine, high above, released a rain as if a summer storm; it had turned the once fine powder, which had blanketed the ground, into a wasteland of puddles and slush.

She, too, was chilly and damp; her fur, as a result of the chase, was soaked through. The poor creature had become too closely acquainted with one of those frigid pools of water, and was almost lost in the quagmire; just as the trailing beast was upon her, she scrambled to safety. She had then scurried through a neighbouring thicket, and arrived here; security had been found in browned blackberry branches, the remnants of a previous autumn.

A drop of errant melt-water landed squarely upon the tip of her nose. She sneezed in response, and then froze in fear; her hearing leapt to full attention, her senses searching for any sign that her reckless act had betrayed her position. A perceived eternity passed, and her instincts

remained in constant readiness, in preparation for her to either fight or flee but; in the end, there was need for neither. She hunkered down, and waited for the daylight to confirm that she had, indeed, evaded that which chased her.

Her mind drifted back through the events of the previous evening; she recalled her bold escape from the confines of the cabin, out into the freedom of the forest around it. She remembered the triumph that she had felt when she hunted down a woodland rodent, then prepared to claim the prize and, as a token of her gratitude, return it to her hosts. Instead, there had only been her downfall as, in her moment of glory, it came. Forced to flee from her enterprise, she had run as the mouse before her, helpless, afraid and alone.

She shivered and, while the meltwater continued to pool about her in the hollow beneath the branches, shifted about uncomfortably. A sudden sound, a snap of a branch as it submitted to the burden upon it, and she was alert once more, breathless, waiting for the inevitable as her heart strove to thrash its way free from her chest. Time passed, everlasting and ponderous; again, no threat appeared.

The rain, produced by the snow melting high in the trees above, transfixed her; her thoughts drifted. The noise was altered by her mind to resemble the roaring crackle of a blazing fire, particularly the one within the hearth of the cabin in which she guested. She wandered, in her memory, to the previous evening, and found herself curled up on the lap of her host, warm and safe. Perhaps, she had felt too secure; her animal instincts had urged her to venture out into the night, to prove herself and demonstrate her worth.

Her lap had arisen, arms carefully setting her down, and departed for the kitchen; it was possible they meant to prepare an offering for her, but it was more likely that the intent was to cook a dish for her other, promptly returning host, his presence betrayed by the growls of the beast on which he rode. The cat then had the notion of escaping from her gilded cage and, given this chance opportunity, she chose to do so, concealing herself in the ramshackle collection of boots that resided beside the door that led to the outside world.

The gateway opened; she leapt, dodging between the legs of the incoming human and, her wriggling haunches successfully clearing the gap, squeezed through the rapidly reducing fissure. A shout of surprise emerged from her host, followed by an order to return, but she was having none of it and she ran, with a cry of exuberance, out into the night.

Crawling under a bush, she had then sat surveying her hostel, satisfying her ego on a diet of the concern expressed by her hosts, scouring the area with beams of light as they called out for her. The cat was not to be exposed; eventually they relented, and returned to the security of the world inside. She was free to do her will, and impose her dominance on that which resided outdoors; it was a kingdom that would recognize her royalty, and pay tribute to it.

However, her regal excursion had not proceeded in quite in the manner that she had anticipated. This world possessed a demon, a horror that she could not have ever imagined; the feline longed for the protection of her prison, the warmth of the hearth, and the kind attention of her jailers.

The present was revisited when her bright, blue eyes alerted her that the sun was beginning to make its return. Her surroundings brightened but a minute amount, although that was sufficient to show the beast was not in attendance, and provide a ray of hope that the feline's dismal position may be soon to take a turn for the better.

That gleaming was sadly short lived for, right above her, a branch promptly declared its defeat with a deafening splinter and, becoming a streak of white fur across a landscape dimly lit by the coming dawn, she fled her accordingly compromised sanctuary. The cat ran in no particular direction, desperately hunting for a new waypoint, another place to rest until the full onset of daylight that, she was certain, would vanquish the night-creature that pursued her.

She found one, finally, a hollow under the roots of some great tree just large enough for her pampered girth to settle into, and the cat resumed vigilantly watching, carefully listening, and patiently waiting to discover if her recent escapade had, to the beast that lurked within the forested world about her, betrayed her.

Her mind drifted back to the fireplace; its remembered warmth filled her soul and, as she lay, cosily stretched out in front of it, in her memory, brought a moment of peace. The fire crackled, the flames slowly consuming the log; the cat let out a contented sigh, comfortable in the safety of her recollection. There was a loud snap, as the fire breached a pocket of sap in the log of her fantasies, followed by the shocking realization that the sound was present not merely in the feline's imaginings, but in her reality.

She quickly returned to the forest, and listened intently; her fear made a rapid rise as she recognized the laboured breaths of her predator,

the beast snorting and panting. It was searching for her, hunting for its prey, striving to locate the scent that would reveal his quarry. Her impulse begged the cat to flee, pleaded with the feline to make a dash for her life, but she knew this would be futile against such a monster and discarded the petition; motionless and silent, she persisted to wait.

Her nightmare, still probing for its misplaced breakfast, steadily advanced towards her; the beast surveyed the light of the morning for any sign of its prospective conquest. It knew the cat was here, somewhere, and she was well aware that it did. Her mind raced to define options, and surmise a solution to this dire situation but, as she came to the understanding that she was proceeding about this problem in the entirely wrong way, it made an abrupt halt.

She was Queen, after all, and yet she was hiding and fleeing, like some common rodent. This beast, once she made her royalty apparent, was certain to bow to her majesty; she ought to confront it, and challenge it to defy her will. Her courage rose as she reasoned it out; after the monster was made aware of just who it chased, it would be sure to beg off and embark upon a search for new game, leaving her be.

At this moment, it was the time to do such. Sharp with deadly purpose, its steel eyes were focused; the beast had located her, and it was advancing upon her position directly. She emerged from the hollow and, to the front of the beast, stood proudly whilst daring the monster to violate the rule of her law; a stalemate, as she proceeded to parade her noble nature, was consequently created.

She cast her royal blue eyes into the cold, metallic gaze of the beast, waiting for it to decide, and make the proper choice, forsaking its improper endeavour in the face of her clear superiority.

The monster paused for a moment, baffled by the dubious performance of his probable provisions, and bewildered by the apparent disregard it had for its life. He wondered if this was some still-nameless adversary; it may be a menace, previously unknown to him, which he should heed. His sense told him that he must not take the chance that this prey could, in truth, be a predator, and that he should flee in discretion, but his hunger told him that he was starving; he would not have the luxury to undertake a new search for quarry.

Her waiting continued and, with the beast that seemed incapable of reaching an obvious decision, she soon began to grow rather impatient. A hiss and a growl were submitted, in order to add further persuasion; the

beast recoiled for a brief moment, but failed to yield any appreciable ground.

His dishevelled quarry then gained an aggressive posture; it hissed, as if it was a snake and growled, like a cougar. Its efforts merely contributed to his confusion; either it truly was more of a threat than he had previously assessed, or it was malfunctioning and he should put it out of its misery. He was unable to determine which it was, and the exhausted timber wolf, with the notion that the impasse was likely to ensue for some time before it found a resolution, lowered his haunches to the ground.

He stayed his verdict, opting to wait, and see what this, most perplexing, prey would do next.

"Insolent beast!" she ruefully cursed to herself. She could not believe its arrogance, for it would not leave; indeed, while it insisted to stare at her in the manner that she would similarly gaze upon an unopened can of tuna, it had decided to sit down and make itself comfortable. These circumstances were becoming quite intolerable; to reiterate her displeasure, she growled and hissed again, but it was to no avail. The daylight of mid-morning came upon them whilst they remained in the clearing, each facing the other and waiting for their opponent to make, in their battle to establish dominance, the next move.

To his recollection, he had never before encountered any situation such as this; the mysterious creature defied the rules of the forest, and those comprised the only law that he knew. Another animal either ran from you, or attacked; there was no middle ground, and yet that mythical location appeared to be presently occupied by his prey. It remained fixed in place, persisting to hiss and growl, but neither declared an intention to attack, nor displayed any sign that it would soon flee.

His ravenous hunger grew, but only in proportion to his festering fear of this peculiar adversary; no solution appeared to be on the horizon. In truth, it likely had him.

The sad reality was it probably had her; she was becoming convinced that her rapidly approaching, tragic end was inevitable. She berated herself for her foolishness; such a creature would never have the capacity to comprehend her royalty. Nevertheless, the feline was committed, and was unquestionably not in a position to withdraw; her only option was to herself sit, occasionally tendering a hiss, or offering a menacing growl, while silently imploring it to vanish, let her alone and simply disappear.

However, it would not; it lingered, still gazing upon her like she was a Christmas goose roasting in an oven, and salivated over the impending feast. She pined for the hearth now; unable to remember precisely why she had left it, the cat silently damned whatever force it was that had prompted her to embark on such a senseless venture.

A rustle from the kitchen was heard, the distinctive sound of kibble being placed into her bowl; she raised her head from the comfort of the carpet, upon which she laid, that resided in front of the fireplace, soon making the carefully deliberated decision to rise completely, and eat her dinner. This cat was no kitten, to be sure, and that required some effort; she thoroughly stretched, took to her feet and then, to meet with her supper, sauntered idly into the room that housed it.

She shortly stood over her dish, and nibbled contentedly. Although peaceful in her routine, the cat longed for change; she had gradually developed an urge for more engaging activity. The feline, while she chewed, came to a decision. Tonight, she would grace the outside world with her presence and, rewarding her hosts for their ample generosity, capture a trophy with which to return. After all, for their longstanding service they most certainly deserved it.

The wolf was lost. In fact, he had been disoriented for days, not long after he was separated from his fellows in a futile chase after a very quick deer. It had been too fast; the others implored him, brief moments before they themselves had finally done so, to call off his chase. Confident that he would overtake it, he had refused to listen. For hours, well into the night, he carried on; the scent of his pack had gone astray. The wolf was left with no consolation; he had not caught the buck, it had escaped him. Alone, he was cold and hungry, in the dark.

Then, he had spied his salvation; the creature was unbeknownst to him, but it moved and was, therefore, likely edible. He pursued it. Eluding him for a time, he had hastily discovered it again. His ravenous belly would be full; the journey back to his family could begin. That was how it ought to have been, but yet it was not. The wolf was, perhaps needless to state, rather frustrated.

The cat and the wolf both sat, endlessly eyeing each other, well into midday; neither risked acting upon any further aspirations. The sun, meanwhile, had warmed the snow and, with a vengeance, it melted; it was as if heavy rain, kept at bay from it by some divine force, surrounded the clearing.

She, too, was becoming famished; the cat began to seriously consider if the beast itself was edible. The wolf noticed the hunger in the creature's eyes, and was mildly concerned, but yet amused, that it would entertain the notion of eating him. However, he was quite faint, and would only become more so; perhaps, if events kept progressing as they were, it would be provided with the chance to lunch upon him after all.

There was a quiet noise then, one that emerged from the brush on the edge of the clearing. The two adversaries almost failed to notice it; the pair was far too engrossed in their own affairs to be aware of such an intrusion. Soon thereafter, the bushes rustled again.

A brown jackrabbit, completely oblivious to the predators set in their motionless confrontation then haphazardly hopped, in search of some foliage to graze on, out into the clearing.

The carnivorous rivals remained still while the rabbit made its way over to an exposed patch of wet grass, no longer covered by the melting snow, and began to consume its herbivorous repast. A voiceless negotiation took place between the two, then; a pact was created, borne of both circumstance and necessity.

They took one final glance of mutual respect towards each other, and then the predetermined measures were swiftly enacted.

The cat turned and, as the wolf made a lethal lunge for the rabbit, scurried off through the thicket. The loud cries of the hapless hare, grasped within his jaws, were heard while she ran; gruesome crunching, whilst the predator crushed the bones of his revised prey, was subsequently noted. Her frantic flight through the forest persisted; afraid that the beast, opting for a second helping, might change his mind, the cat made a desperate dash for the cabin, and for her fireplace within.

Direction only determined by her deepest desire, she ran for what must have been hours and, howling hysterically at the door until one of her hosts emerged, returned to her home in due course. They scolded her vigorously for the worry she caused them by her inappropriate, impromptu adventure; afterwards, the sodden, starving cat was attended to by a dry towel, and a generous meal; she then contentedly took to her position in front of the hearth.

Revelling in its warmth, she vowed to never leave either the comfort it gave, nor the security it provided ever again.

Twilight soon came, and the cat partook in the same leisure that she had every evening previous to the last; she whiled away the time

gazing into the flickering flames, and enjoying their endless dance. The night had quite well settled in when, over the relentless roar of the fire, a faint cry was heard; it seemed important that she investigate it, but the feline was uncertain as to why.

Rousing herself to her feet, she made her way over to the window, leapt up onto the sill and looked out beyond. At the edge of the clearing, in the darkness of the trees that surrounded the cabin, she saw two, familiar steel eyes. Their gazes met; a brief acknowledgement was made of their previous encounter, with a footnote appended that the wolf had found his way, and was himself heading home.

He then disappeared, and she jumped down to the floor; their story had concluded.

Her host, situated upon the chair that stood in front of her fireplace, was startled as the cat took to her lap. She purred happily; warm and safe, the feline was Queen of at least this.

With that, she was quite satisfied.

A jar of purple tomatoes is larger than the seventh sacred elephant.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

A FATEFUL REUNION

FATTICUS FEARED THAT HE MIGHT ACTUALLY EXPLODE. His anticipation rose to an insufferable level whilst the train plodded painfully towards their final destination, the French village of Elbeuf. He scampered to and fro, up and down the aisle of the train carriage in a wasted attempt to release some of the excess enthusiasm that he had been cultivating since their departure from Paris.

Caroline attributed the display to her ginger-haired companion's strange character, descriptions of which had tended to gather quite an audience along their journey. Casually, she waved off the grave concern expressed by other passengers in regard to Fatticus with a brief, but concise explanation.

"I am afraid you will simply have to excuse his idiosyncrasies; as you can plainly see, he is a rather curious creature."

None saw fit to dispute the author's terse assertions.

As if approaching the conclusion to a novel, at which point she would typically pen 'The End,' Caroline was at once both apprehensive and welcoming of her impending finale. No matter how this mystery resolved itself, the affair would be over, and it was her hope that, with this bizarre chapter placed behind her, she could be permitted to resume her typical less-than-intriguing existence.

Should events end peacefully, the only legacy remaining would be that of the anomalous behaviours exhibited by her cat; however, his mysteria would only shape peculiar, but small ripples in a vast ocean of otherwise relative normalcy. Her life would be a comparative tranquillity, spent either alone or with her beloved Francis, the man on a white horse who had rescued her so long ago from her tedium on the Camberwell family estate.

Of course, the second alternative was greatly preferred.

Suddenly, disaster struck as the train came to a screeching halt. The poor, unrestrained Fatticus found himself flung down the aisle, as an irritable child would hastily discard an unwanted toy. He proceeded to make his way, ears over haunches in a repetitive motion, from one end of the carriage to the other, his fat-burdened carcass quite effectively providing an unanticipated demonstration of the principles of momentum.

The passenger's voices quickly rose while their concerns began to mount. Speculations, from those of collision to fantastic notions of bandits, circulated among the worried travellers. Caroline had no particular desire to know the exact reason for the delay; her only wish was to learn the extent of it. Even the slightest deviation to the author's schedule would be met with her great displeasure, and an extended layover could eventuate in a rather violent display of well-earned enragement.

The conductor soon informed them, as he made his way in an effort to spread his news from one carriage to the next, that the engineer had been forced to bring the train to a halt. The boiler had exhibited symptoms of impending failure, and to travel onward would be to court an explosion.

A new locomotive would be required to complete their journey, he continued; the railway company would provide one as soon as it became available. All that the passengers need do, he exclaimed cordially, was be patient until such time as the substitute arrived.

Finally, on behalf of his company, the conductor offered his 'sincerest apologies for any inconvenience the delay may cause our valued customers.' It was an olive branch that was not terribly well received.

An hour passed while they waited, and then a later service to Elbeuf stepped around their ailing steam engine, sponsoring the vocal protestations of many stranded passengers. It was not possible, the conductor insisted, to transfer the aggrieved travellers on to another train; their daily schedule was fully booked, and there was simply no seating available for them.

They would have no choice but to wait. A second hour was wasted; then, to the jeers of the discontented travellers, a further train made a foray past the stranded carriages, and their impatience continued to mount. The conductor endeavoured unsuccessfully to calm his patrons with the hollow assurance that at any moment their service would resume.

Halfway into the third hour, the promised replacement boiler finally did make its appearance and, as their journey thankfully recommenced, Caroline and her travelling companions all breathed a collective sigh of relief.

They were nearly three hours behind schedule.

It had become late in the afternoon, and dusk would be upon them by the time they were to finally arrive in Elbeuf. The woman prayed that her beloved Francis would be on the station platform to meet both her and Fatticus, but she feared that he had likely concluded she was not coming that day. Caroline would be alone, in a strange place for yet another night.

Perhaps on this occasion, should the rogue operative choose to again show himself, she would finally fall victim to the scheming of the disgraced GT Ninety-Nine.

Fatticus had provided a welcome distraction during the unscheduled interlude for the passengers; he spent the remainder of the excursion sleeping soundly on Caroline's lap. His belly was quite full of all the treats he had been fed by the children, his friendly nature lending to irresistible entertainment as they had cuddled and played with him during the delay.

He purred softly whilst his Lady stroked the fur on his back; his guardian, meanwhile, pondered the potential difficulties that the universe could trot out for her next. She strove to prepare herself for whatever extraordinary events that were destined to unfold after this leg of their saga had concluded, and they arrived at the modest French town.

Eventually, the conductor made his way through the carriage for one final time, informing his weary passengers that the train was finally approaching its long overdue destination. The next stop would indeed be Elbeuf. This led to sarcastic cheers from the travellers, and the hasty retreat of the berated conductor, the man having had quite enough of the inconsiderate insults hoisted upon him by the frustrated occupants of the delayed carriages.

Fatticus awoke in excitement and, the feline hoping to catch a glimpse of Cleopawtra as the train pulled into the station, placed his paws upon the glass of his window; sadly, he failed to spot her anywhere.

With no desire to struggle with Fatticus amidst the stream of humanity that desperately yearned to disembark from the source of their irritation, Caroline waited, once the locomotive had come to a stop at its platform within the Elbeuf train station, for the other passengers to depart. After the crowd had dispersed, no one readily recognizable remained on the platform; there was no obvious gentleman that she could identify as Francis but this, although disappointing, did not come as a complete surprise.

The dark was starting to triumph over the light as the novelist, with her cat in her arms, finally stepped from the train. The locomotive then returned to life in a bid to move its carriages on to a further destination.

The station appeared to then be abandoned; both of the two platforms were quite vacant. Three lamps on each shone down upon the pavement beneath them, and light rain was visible in their dim yellow beams.

“He is not here,” made the astute observation of the familiar, but unwelcome voice of Fritz, the former operative that had since fallen into disrepute.

He stepped into the light, the unsavoury gentleman masquerading as a French policeman. He wore an outfit Caroline could only assume he had obtained from a less than generous officer, likely in the process of his obvious escape from the authorities in Paris.

“It was so fortunate that your train encountered such difficulties,” he stated, a sinister smile gracing his rough visage with a false sense of cheer. “For myself, that is. I could not have planned any better sabotage.”

There was a great deal of truth to this statement. His festivities, once his train had passed both the disabled locomotive, and the carriage that the woman Hawthorn occupied, had been carefully muted but rather extensive. It was as if the world had decided to hand her to him on a silver platter; he thanked it well and profusely for its generosity.

“You, sir, are a bastard,” Caroline retorted towards her hated adversary; “If you were not such a lying, cheating scoundrel, I would fight you myself.” There could be no fair confrontation with such a man; he likely failed to even comprehend the meaning of the word.

Fritz had proven repeatedly that he had no sense of decency, and that he would use whatever means at his disposal to obtain his ends; if those happened to include her demise, then she was at the very least going to inform the operative, prior to his implementation of those despicable actions, of exactly how she thought of him.

She outlined in explicit detail what sort of individual she thought Fritz was. Caroline conjectured upon his parentage, his habits of personal grooming, his mental capacity, his sanity and, finally, some rather bizarre notions regarding his speculated romantic endeavours. Fritz blushed, chuckled and laughed as Caroline employed some wonderfully colourful metaphors that would likely induce an embarrassed smile from even the most hardened sailor.

The operative was quite willing to entertain her slanderous statements; this was the last testament of a condemned woman, one that he was soon to dispatch to whatever afterlife she had previously elected to subscribe.

“I have now said,” declared Caroline, emphatically, “all that I am going to say in regards to the matter.”

Her diatribe concluded; Fritz then produced the pistol he would use to shoot her. He slowly advanced towards the woman, preparing to catch her as she fell, after the bullet had pierced her heart, and brought her life to its end.

The author dropped her cat, Fatticus, who was then ordered by his companion to walk away, and not involve himself in the matter any further. Conversely, the feline, in defiance of his Lady's wishes, instead prepared to attack the armed man. The ginger-tabby would simply not stand aside while such vile events unfolded in his presence.

However, his intended intervention would prove to be quite unnecessary.

"You stay right where you are, you fiend," the voice of Doctor Brunswick resounded as he emerged from the shadows that surrounded the station platform. His own pistol was drawn, and pointed in the rogue agent's precise direction.

Missus Glenferrie appeared from the darkness to quickly collect Fatticus. Her piercing gaze dared Fritz to strike her down the way he had shot her beloved General Carlton, but it was a challenge the spy chose to ignore. He granted the housekeeper permission to return to the fringe of the light with the ginger-tabby, and meet with Missus Tottenham, also present at the disquieting proceedings.

"Mister Kao sends his regards," the physician announced broadly to the astonished Caroline. He then directed his attention to the tabby, in a more gentle tone. "The young Victoria gives you her greetings, Fatticus."

In a brief aside to the author, he said quietly, "We could simply not have allowed you to come here alone. It would just not have done you know, decorum and all of that."

Brunswick, as he directed the author to take to the side with the housekeepers, slowly walked towards the meditative Fritz.

"Let us have a little chat, between gentlemen, now shall we," the doctor began to propose to the contemplative operative, the latter providing quick consideration to all of his options before choosing to, by administering a bullet to the meddling physician's shoulder, flatly reject Brunswick's offer.

The injury forced the doctor to release his weapon; it fell from his hand, slid across the platform and then thrown down, into the tracks, below. The man, helpless to whatever further indiscretions Fritz may have then decided to inflict upon him, collapsed to the ground.

"I think that will be quite enough, Fritz," spoke a dapper English voice cheerily, his inflection both proper and charming. It was owned by a gentleman

who, sporting a top hat and wearing a cape, then moved from his concealment within the darkness out into the light.

Caroline recognized him instantly; her love was quite capable of seeing through his disguise, the veil of deception was invisible to the one who had sworn to spend the remainder of her days with him.

The debonair gentleman continued to speak while he turned to confront the former British Army operative whose threats had ensured his service in that same institution. "There serves no purpose in any more of this pointless violence; after all, it is me that you really want."

Fritz laughed jovially, his smile large and wide. His teeth proudly displayed themselves in a triumphant fashion whilst he moved to meet the gaze of Feline Remote Intelligence Gathering Services operative GT Twenty-Two, formerly known as Colonel Francis Hawthorn.

"Francis," he shouted joyfully, his arms wide, as if inviting GT Twenty-Two to embrace. "It has been such a long time!" His voice then sobered, assuming a casual, friendly tone. "I was just," he paused, as if searching for the correct euphemism, "acquainting myself with your lovely wife. She is indeed quite the specimen."

"She has a great deal of, how would you say, spirit," Fritz chuckled playfully. "Not always the best quality in a wife," he laughed, "but an admirable one in a woman."

Caroline furnished Fritz with a look that certainly proved his point.

"She is none of your concern," Francis tersely retorted, choosing not to dignify the taunt with his anger. "The only one you need trouble yourself with, Herr Fritz, is me. Now, the only real question is," he paused dramatically, "are you such a coward that you can only duel with a pistol, or are you man enough to fight me with a real weapon"

It was more of a statement than a query; the gentleman Hawthorn provided the punctuation by, with a flourish, removing his gloved hands from underneath his cape, and revealing the two swords that they held.

Francis was well aware that the rogue spy was an effective swordsman; he felt that it was quite likely the egotistical Fritz would accept the challenge in order to prove his mastery. In fact, Francis had counted upon it.

Fritz pondered his options once again, the sly man always calculating the odds, and decided they were prone to be in his favour. It would certainly not be against his better judgement to accept the challenge; his expertise in swordplay was a virtue in which he held great confidence.

As he reached out in an invitation for Francis to toss him a sword, he let his gun fall to the ground, kicking it down into the rails where neither man could use it against the other. It would be a rare event; the former German-come-dishonourable British operative would make this a fair fight.

At a minimum, it would be a more balanced match than his characteristic contests tended to be.

"I love you, Caroline!" Francis cried, as he cast off his top hat and charged towards his challenger, Fritz; their blades soon connected in an opening strike.

The Missus' Glenferrie and Tottenham crouched down, comforting the wounded Brunswick, while Caroline simply stood silently and watched the events unfold. Slightly, her mouth hung open in an expression of complete and thorough disbelief. Her one true love was locked into a battle that could end in his demise. In the end, their reunion may merely consist of a brief, heartbreaking few moments as he departed from this world, leaving her life as swiftly as he had re-entered it.

Subsequently, the two swordsmen fought, moving back and forth along the station platform, each advancing and then retreating with no combatant showing any clear advantage over the other.

Fritz was positively delighted. He merely waited for a moment in which he could exploit the inevitable weakness his less-experienced opponent was certain to present. Then, he would clearly and decisively demonstrate his superiority, bringing an end to this admittedly creative finale that had been engineered by the treacherous operative, Francis Hawthorn.

The knowledge that the one he loved so dearly was present drove Francis on. The choice of weapons had been inspired by fond memories of Caroline's romance novels, stories in which love always won out, and in which no evil force could ever prevent the two protagonists from being together. He had remembered how dramatic he found her literary swordfights and, having received some training in the art himself under the tutelage of the man with whom he clashed, he had decided that it would make a fitting end to what had been such a tedious chapter in both of their lives.

Fatticus stood in quiet observance of those tense moments, while Cleopawtra sat beside him, and regarding her companion's confrontation with their sworn enemy paid careful attention to his progress. Neither cat was really capable of comprehending what made humans behave this way; more specifically, the felines were unaware of what possessed the species to kill each other over what appeared to be, in such lethal context, rather trivial reasons.

Despite their personal attractions to these particular individuals, the felines would agree that the heavily rage-influenced creatures were nothing but a menace, not only to themselves, but also to every other animal fated to reside upon the face of the human-dominated planet.

Nevertheless, of having a preference for one man in the mortal contest that they witnessed both cats were also guilty, but they did not advocate for the demise of the other. Not even then did they desire to see the death of the man who had caused such great distress to the ones that they dearly loved.

"It would appear that you have improved," remarked the mildly impressed Villain, as the Hero narrowly avoided his skewering at the behest of his opponent's razor-sharp blade. "I was always able to catch you with that move."

The Hero had the scars to prove that painful statement to be true, but such strong encouragement had prompted him to learn how to avoid his teacher's devious manoeuvre, and avoid further such discomfort.

"I have a few tricks of my own, now," retorted the Hero, and he provided evidence by nearly slicing open his opponent's neck; the Villain narrowly avoided his beheading by a matter of inches. He smiled, and then answered with a furious assault. His charge forced the Hero's back to the wall, rapid thrusts selected in an effort to confuse the Hero. The Villain pressed his opponent to the bricks, in preparation to finish his masterpiece; he would deliver a masterful blow that would finally bring an end to all of this nonsense.

"Francis!" the Heroine shouted, helpless to do anything to prevent her husbands, apparently imminent, demise; the sheer terror that the spectre of his death unleashed in her heart provided dramatic emphasis to that single word. She called out to him to do whatever was necessary to save his precious life for, were she to lose him again, the Heroine would not be able to go on.

Her Hero turned his face towards his Heroine and smiled; then, expertly eluding his adversary, he darted within the small station, the Villain making his pursuit a mere fraction of a second hence.

Both men were out of sight, but the sounds of their swords echoed throughout the empty facility. Their hidden clash carried on beneath their audience, in the subterranean tunnel that connected the two platforms, for several minutes. Each man fought against the other as a matter of principle; their individual convictions were almost equal to the lust they had for revenge.

Fatticus situated himself closely against Cleopawtra in an effort to find comfort; the stout ginger-tabby feared for the human called Francis, the lost companion of his Lady Caroline. The more mature feline, however, had a great

deal of confidence in her partner's ability to defeat the Villain named Fritz, and attempted to reassure her junior of this with tender licks to his forehead.

Doctor Brunswick's bleeding had been brought, by the housekeepers who had elected to care for him, under control. Regardless, the man was still quite incapacitated, and obviously unable to provide any assistance to the Hero with his swordplay.

It remained at the Hero's discretion to conclude this episode; only he could vanquish the evil Villain and bring about the happy end that his allies sought for the loving couple. The men reappeared on the opposite platform and the spectators could only watch, as if taking in a theatre performance, while their deadly encounter resumed.

"Do you know," the Villain casually mentioned, making idle banter while they locked blades for, what may have been, the hundredth time, "that your wife is a complete, I hope that this is the expression, 'pain in the neck.'"

"Yes, she is," grinned the Hero as he silently struggled to break the impasse, "but I love her dearly for it." He succeeded in his effort; however, his lunge failed to dispatch his opponent, and they resumed their march, back and forth, on the opposite platform.

Each was beginning to tire from their strenuous activity; the victor would likely be the one who, in their common battle with fatigue, would simply survive the longest. Their steels met progressively less often, and their assaults grew more erratic.

It looked as if, either way, the conflict would end soon, as neither man appeared to have the strength to carry their confrontation on much further. The Hero then staggered drunkenly, and fell down into the rails below; his foot became captured by a section of switch track, and his doomed fate was heralded by the sound of an oncoming train, the giant contrivance likely wishing to occupy the space that he currently inhabited.

The Villain looked down upon the trapped Hero in exhausted satisfaction; it was not the decisive victory that he had envisioned but, as his opponent would soon face his prescribed punishment, it would be a triumph nonetheless. Fritz was proud; he had served his purpose as the self-wielding instrument called upon to deliver justice for the treacherous acts of Francis Hawthorn.

Francis could only turn and look into the eyes of his one true love, the woman who had travelled there to be with him merely on the advice of her cat. He gazed sadly upon his wife, who still had faith in him after all of those lost

years; she was the one to whom he had failed, who he would soon leave to be alone once again, and face the cold, cruel world without him.

It could only be a heartless husk of a man who could not feel the love that the pair felt for each other; their obvious emotion emanated throughout the station, touching the spirit of all who were present.

Even the blackened heart of the less than victorious Fritz was moved; his want for celebration diminished considerably as he truly became aware of what, precisely, he had done, and the absolute travesty that he had engineered. He realized that he had become so dedicated to his service that his humanity had been forgotten; the operative had made it a triviality far less important than the rule of order that he was charged to maintain.

Fritz could not participate in the destruction of such a magnificent relationship; the look in the eyes of either Hawthorn told him the same truth, that no one had any right to interfere in such matters, and no excuse was sufficiently valid to separate two people so very much in love.

There was a switch, which he might just be able to reach in time to free the trapped Hawthorn. Discarding his sword, Fritz leapt into the pit below and, after offering a brief but succinct apology to his dumbfounded opponent, he ran down the tracks. Fritz hurried as fast as his severely fatigued legs would carry him towards the lever, while the oncoming train moved so quickly and perilously closer to a fateful meeting with the fastened Francis.

The two Hawthorns both stood spellbound, staring incomprehensibly after the man who had threatened both their lives on so many occasions, as he risked his own in a bid to save his apparently former adversary. No speculation could be ventured by either member of the couple as to the source of their enemy's sudden change in motives.

Fritz had been so foolish. He begged for forgiveness, as he made his hasty expedition to the switch, from whoever was capable to hear him. His only possible repentance would be the diversion of the gigantic locomotive, the iron beast that, by forever silencing one of the two lovebirds, was soon to put an end to the romance of the Hawthorns.

The fallen agent had himself known such affection; before the German Army had so cruelly taken that away from him, he had been so wonderfully in love. Then, his soul was turned dark and cold by a military machine that never concerned itself with insignificant notions such as love.

Cleopawtra, as he huddled closer to her, comforted Fatticus. The simple cat despised whichever outcome soon to make itself evident, wanting neither human, Francis nor Fritz to face their demise under such terrible circumstances.

Fatticus cared for Cleopawtra a great deal, but he wished that none of this had ever happened, and that he had never fallen through the door, or had the dreams in which he had spoken to her.

He could be back then, there in his castle in the sky with everyone safe, secure and certainly not in the path of oncoming locomotives.

The steam boiler sounded its whistle in a desperate attempt to discourage the rash activities of the former Feline Remote Intelligence Gathering Service operative GT Ninety-Nine; however, he persisted in his determination to reach the lever, and prevent the death of a man who had a love for his wife such as the German had never seen.

He would reach it. Fritz would make it to the switch, and swing it around, in the process capturing his own foot inside the now-shifted track and, under the wheels of the approaching locomotive, sentencing himself to death.

Fritz was not frightened. He knew deep inside his soul that, in order for all concerned to find peace, it was simply how these particular series of events must conclude.

He twisted to face the Hawthorns and, a mere instant before the engine overtook Fritz, he successfully made a salute towards the two that had allowed him to redeem his soul. Both humans and felines averted their eyes from the horrific sight that then transpired, all mourning the loss of a man who had, such a short time ago, been their mortal enemy.

His foot free, Francis pulled himself up onto the station platform, to finally embrace his beloved wife for the first time in over a decade. Caroline returned his affections with equal enthusiasm. Their love shined an overwhelming light over the tragedy that had been required to save it.

Fatticus was pleased to see his human guardian so happy, and in such joy as he had never observed in her before, but he was sad that Fritz had to sacrifice himself in order for it to be so; the man proved himself to be, in the end, a hero. Cleopawtra provided him with some much welcomed consolation, while Caroline gave Francis some rather brief introductions; the pair, before the authorities arrived to investigate the evening's antics, were in urgent need to depart.

The two ladies each furnished their favourite feline with one final farewell kiss, and the grateful husband expressed his utmost gratitude, for his role in the couple's reunion, to Doctor Brunswick.

Then, the two humans, and their duo of ginger-tabbies, were gone. The physician, attended to by the Missus' Glenferrie and Tottenham, remained on the platform to attempt some manner of explanation for the shortly arriving police;

their tale would be a recounting of events that were so fantastic as to be almost believable.

Despite all of the outlandish occurrences that were noted in their narrative, it was in the end a simple story of love, the account of two intertwined souls who, arbitrarily separated by the hand of man, had been returned to each other by a force that was much too powerful to oppose.

They would be allowed once again to let their love sing out with notes of pure joy; their bond would never twice be broken, the couple not made to part from each other forevermore.

It was the simplest of all tales, but by far the most profound.

EPILOGUE

A NEW BEGINNING

THE CHIEF INSPECTOR STOOD out in the brusque cool air. His Christmas Eve morning had been spent at an impromptu checkpoint, the policeman on the watch for an accused murderer, a former German-turned-British spy known only as Fritz.

He stamped his feet in a futile effort to keep himself warm, as he watched the slow progress of a man and a woman whilst they made their way up the hill towards his small Bavarian town. The gentleman was smartly dressed, clad in a well-tailored suit; his overcoat was worn by his feminine companion, obviously to keep her warm in the frigid temperature. They each sported a ginger-tabby, held in their arms; one of these was quite obese.

When they finally reached the gate, the Inspector spoke with them. They were the town's newest residents, the Hawthorns. The English couple had relocated to his humble village in order that the gentleman, an engineer could oversee the redevelopment of the mysterious former horticultural facility. It had been abandoned rather suddenly, not that long after the strange affair of the clandestine gardener, Frederic Stutt.

The Inspector would forever remember that event. Very little of note in his meagre jurisdiction had ever taken place.

They had already become the subjects of great gossip. The Englishman had bought a house, apparently unseen a mere week before, and the furnishings arrived in the town only a day ago. The Inspector had watched with some interest as the their articles had been delivered, and was mildly amused by the difficulties that the men of the shipping company had suffered while they had struggled to offload several pieces of awkward English furniture.

Their greatest source of annoyance had been found in the guise of an aging piano; several layers of dust laid were upon it by the many years it had evidently languished in storage.

It was of some interest that the smaller of the two tabbies reminded the Chief Inspector very much of Frederic's cat. In fact, when he asked to hold her, she appeared to recognize the policeman as if it were so. The cat purred at his touch as if he was an old friend. Of course, this notion was rather implausible; the likelihood that this could be the same animal was negligible. Francis Hawthorn and Frederic Stutt were quite separate in many ways.

Still, even if it was coincidence, it made for an unsettling feeling. The diligent investigator filed his thoughts for future reference.

He admonished the larger tabby in a somewhat comical fashion. The cat was a younger male, who appeared at least on the surface to have a nose for trouble. The Inspector advised the blue-eyed ruffian that the police would be keeping an eye on him, and so he had best behave himself. The sloth of a cat stared up towards the officer nonchalantly in response.

His warning was then replied to by way of an odd expulsion, one that sounded something like both sneeze and cough produced in chorus. This display of disrespect merely served to confirm the Chief Inspector's suspicions about the rotund feline's notions regarding the order of law.

As he shook his finger at the unruly creature, the policeman chuckled at the feline's cavalier reaction, and advised him to be more polite. He then moved to provide a more formal welcome to his latest charges. The middle-aged gentleman held his similarly matured wife close to him while they talked. It was as if they were young newlyweds, not a couple for whom clearly many anniversaries had passed.

He soon judged them to be quite satisfactory, these Hawthorns, and expected to encounter little trouble on their part. If they chose to stay after the gentleman's project was completed, the Inspector was certain that they would make a respectable addition to the town's resident population.

At the very least, minus the obese ginger-tabby they would be acceptable. He had the feeling that he would be required to 'keep his eye' on that creature.

It was revealed that their uncomfortable means of conveyance, the wintry walk into the town, was the result of an unfortunate breakdown. However, Mister Hawthorn seemed to be unconcerned regarding the recovery of his malfunctioning motorcar, and was instead eager to introduce his wife to their recently purchased house. The pair, after their long journey was quite spent.

The Inspector only agreed to provide the couple with directions to their new home if, he demanded cheerfully, they promised to invite him in later for tea. He had experienced that most British of ceremonies during his recent visit to London, and enjoyed it very much.

They gratefully agreed, and he then outlined the path they must take to reach their latest address. The Chief Inspector felt that the woman would be quite pleased with her residence; the furnishings were very English. The always-inquisitive Inspector had noted tags on the items that indicated they had been purchased in an estate auction over a decade ago, and were held in a warehouse ever since.

It was a curious observation, but indicated nothing untoward even to the persistently suspicious investigator. Perhaps, one day when he came around for a visit, he would venture to ask the engineer Hawthorn about it.

Indeed, he felt certain that he would be seeing the couple quite often, Francis and Caroline, and their two pussycats, the small, cute affectionate creature known as Cleopawtra and the grotesquely obese feline delinquent referred to by the peculiar moniker of Fatticus.

The policeman's feelings had been proven in the past to be generally accurate.

The Chief Inspector concluded their discussion by wishing the affectionate couple a happy Christmas. The joyous glow in both of their eyes stood as a declaration that for them it would certainly be so.

They moved along then, with their twin tabbies, to make their way to their new home for some much-needed and well-deserved rest. The policeman was glad for the encounter, satisfied in his assessment as to the obviously principled character of the town's most-recent inhabitants.

The Chief Inspector resumed his vigil, his eyes wary of a rogue named Fritz, a man wanted by the British so desperately that the poor frozen policeman had been made to stand in readiness out in the frigid cold on a Christmas Eve morning, rather than be indoors, enjoying the warmth of his fireplace.

One day, possibly, he would learn the story of the fugitive. He might be made aware of the details during a muted conversation, held in hushed tones with the gentleman engineer, Francis in the Hawthorn's sitting room, while sipping a steaming hot cup of afternoon tea.

Then again, perhaps he would not.

THE END.

POSTSCRIPT

A FEW PARTING WORDS

THIS NOVEL IS ABOUT LOVE; that much ought to be by now rather obvious. It is also about heroes.

This book does not however concern the common self-motivated variety; this narrative instead regards those who choose, in spite of their own personal detriment and risk, to become heroes or even, in their typically spontaneous efforts to save others, sacrifice their lives.

The dog in the alley, the cat on the ship, even Fritz all became such when they put their selfish ideals aside and realized that life is about far more than merely what an individual accomplishes for themselves.

This is the true act of heroism; Francis, the Brigadier and Doctor Brunswick must all be commended for their brave efforts, but they are not heroes. Those who defeat that which resides within in order to fight for those who exist without deserve the highest accolades. It is to them that we must extend our gratitude, and grant our respect.

These are our heroes.

Until we meet again.

Melody Ayres-Griffiths.